

Being and Longing in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*  
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## Abstract

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Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) is a seemingly inconsequential novel about a British-Asian child who undertakes a voyage of social education in the English Midlands in the late 1960s. However, this thesis relates the novel to a broader context inside and outside the textual world in the aftermath of Indian independence and Partition in August, 1947. It conducts a socio-historical analysis to trace the parallel narratives of the protagonist, Meena Kumar, and her communities of residence and inheritance. The dissertation draws upon postcolonial theory to analyse the continuing repercussions of Indian colonisation both in the text and in external British society. Approaching *Anita and Me* as a Black British *Bildungsroman* provides a framework to unite these multiple threads of individual and social development.

The thesis views the novel as a performative artefact which represents the transformation of Britain from an imperial power to a post-imperial society, at the same time as actively contributing to this transformation as an element of public culture. Meena's journey of self-determination entails a partial decolonisation of her mind, juxtaposed with national identities which preserve an imperial worldview. The dissertation explores the contradictions of human relationships and the often ambivalent aversion to, and yet desire for, racialised others. A central focus is the troubled friendship between Meena and the character

of Anita Rutter. The thesis accentuates the semi-autobiographical nature of the text as a form of fictional “mythology” (Syal 10) for imagining personal connections to historical moments.

The three chapters examine Syal’s *Bildungsroman* from alternative perspectives. The opening chapter explores interactions between class and race; the desire for belonging; the development of personal identifications in conjunction with national imaginaries; and the complexities of post-imperial racism. The second chapter considers the phenomenon of diaspora; the Partition of India; and the association between memory, history, and narratives. In the concluding chapter, the meanings of family and the “homely” and the “unhomely” are analysed. These interlinked sections emphasise the novel’s representation of the combined effects of class inequalities, historically engrained racial anxiety, and racialised visions of the overlapping English and British nations.

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With thanks to my caring human and furry families and spectacular friends. And finally, I dedicate this project to the memory of those who have departed to a more peaceful place.

~

“What does Christopher Robin do in the mornings? He learns. He becomes Educated. He instigates – I *think* that is the word he mentioned, but I may be referring to something else – he instigates Knowledge.”

Eeyore, *The House at Pooh Corner*

A.A. Milne

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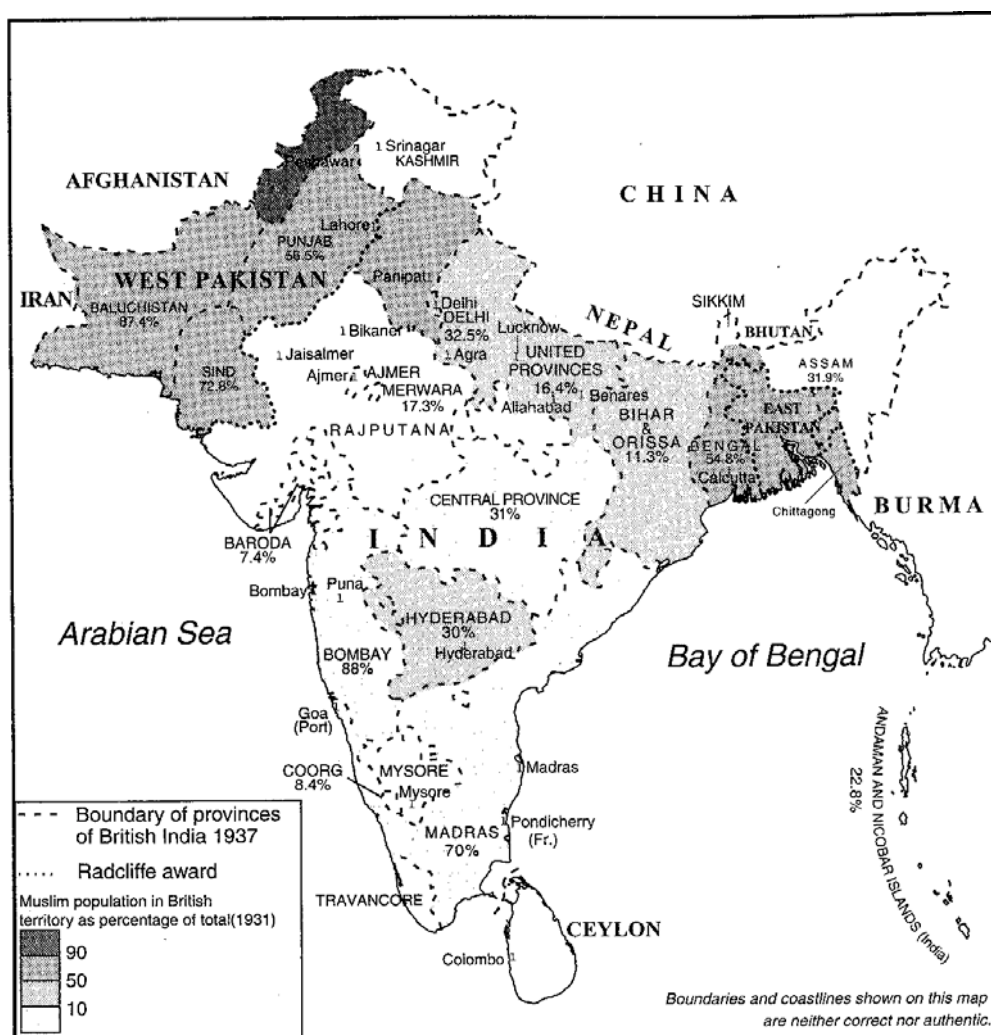


Fig. 1. Map of Indian Partition from Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2000) 4.



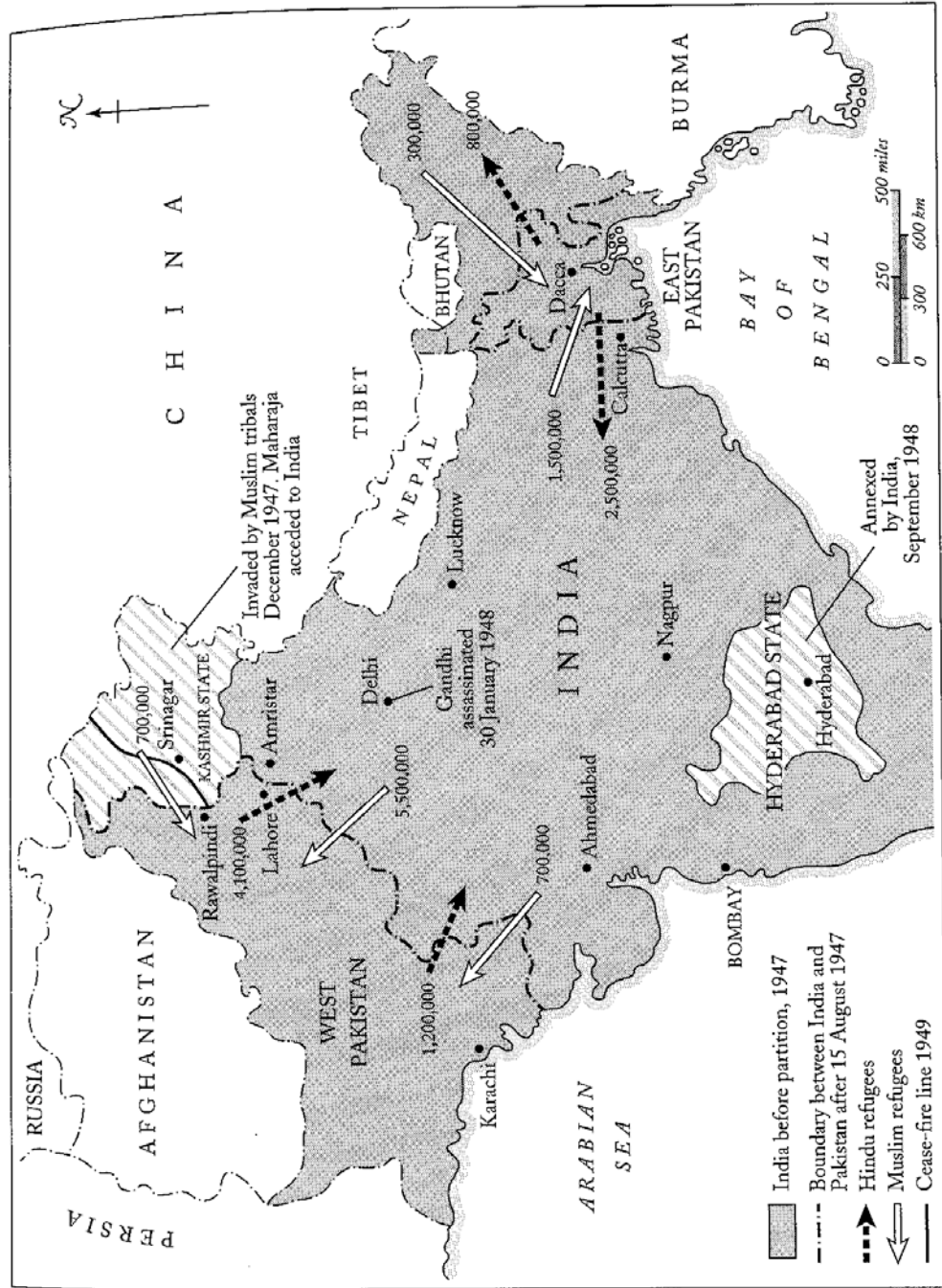


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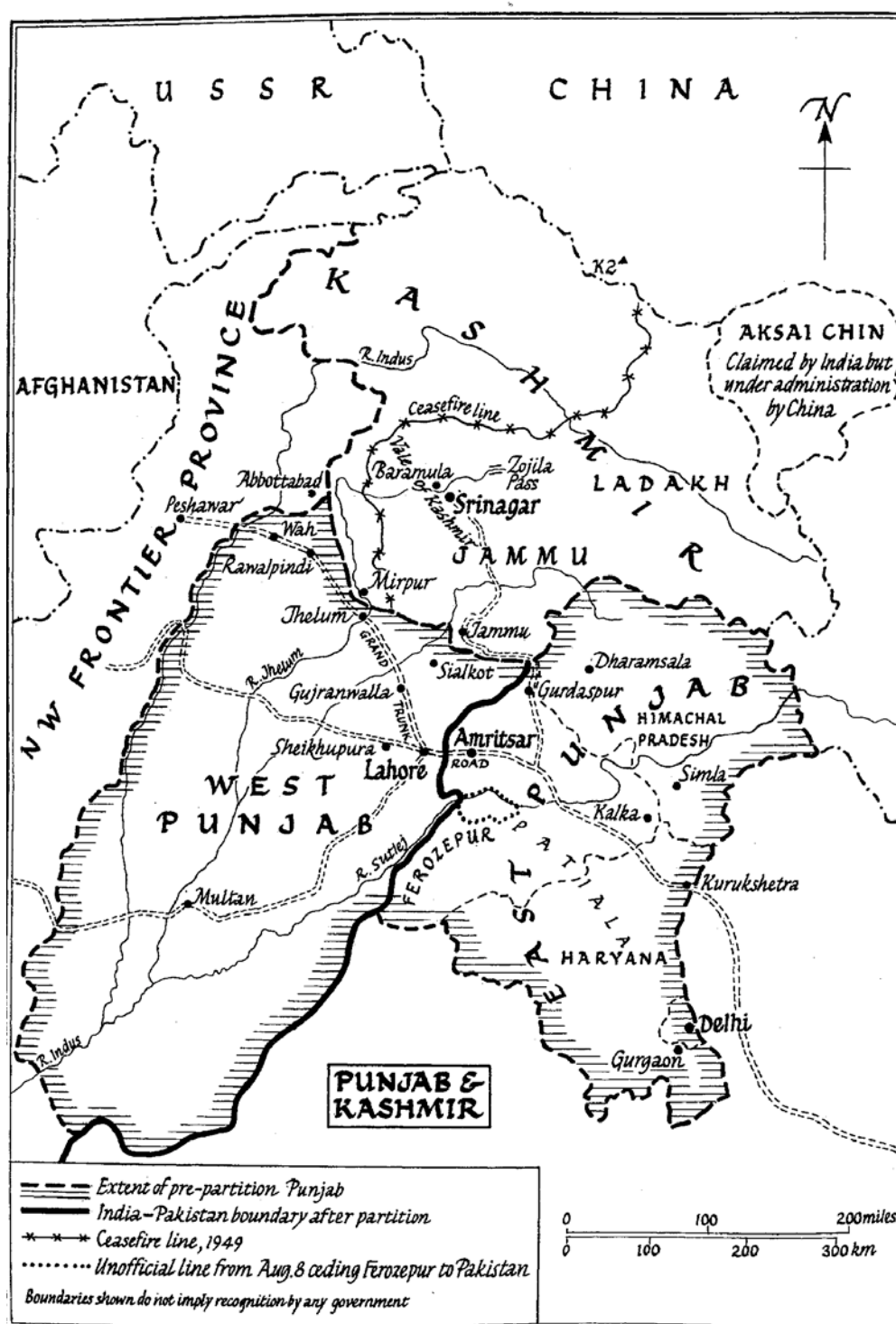


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## Introduction

### Being and Longing in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*

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“... *this little war of sacrifice and gain ...*”<sup>1</sup>

Imagine a scene of scrutiny in which a young girl of Indian heritage is appraised by an older girl of Anglo-Saxon heritage. The penetrating gaze paralyses the younger girl and converts her into skin and body as she yearns to be accepted by the other. This miniature power-play in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) is structured by the past dynamics of the British colonisation of India and exemplifies numerous contemporary encounters. Syal writes a literary portrayal of a colonial past which constantly re-surfaces and shapes the present. *Anita and Me* symbolises the transformation of Britain into a post-imperial society and subsequent confrontation with its colonial past. The novel is set during the late 1960s in rural England and depicts the childhood of a British-Asian character who is born into this space of the former colonising authority. While Meena Kumar is born in England, her Punjabi parents migrated to the fictional Midlands village of Tollington after the Partition of India in 1947.

This dissertation examines *Anita and Me* from a postcolonial perspective as a Black British *Bildungsroman*, employing a socio-historical methodology to analyse both text and context. It is a seemingly unremarkable novel of development which bears witness to the broader

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<sup>1</sup> *Anita and Me* (181).

unfolding of immigration and nationhood in Britain. The thesis traces the parallel narratives of the protagonist's personal development and the changing fabric of her small village and society. The dismantling of Empire, and immigration after World War II, have profoundly altered Britain and the novel suggests it will remain a divided entity until this change is accepted. *Anita and Me* is a "mythology" (Syal 10) which attempts to overcome the fissures in the heroine's and the author's histories, representing a transitional stage between historical epochs with the mutual changes of world, protagonist, and genre (Bakhtin 23). Britain and India are both transformed by the merging of ostensibly disparate components which accompany colonisation and migration. Thus, the publication of the text within a British public culture represents this change as well as the content of the text.

Physical and metaphorical voyages are fundamental elements of *Bildungsromane* and the reader also undertakes a narrative voyage. *Anita and Me* appropriates the imperial archetype of travelling into darkness in pursuit of knowledge (Boehmer 201). Meena's journey entails the acquisition of confidence to position herself multiply across contexts. The thesis argues that her worldview is partly colonised and that she undergoes a gradual and painful process of "decolonising the mind." This decolonisation is inevitably incomplete and cannot erase the past affiliations between India and Britain. Instead, Meena learns to manipulate colonial history in alternative ways and to find positive value in her

diasporic consciousness. The identity that is purportedly documented in the novel is performatively assembled through the practice of writing.

The dissertation draws upon postcolonial theory for its compelling interdisciplinary approach to histories of injustice and resistance.

Postcolonialism is a heterogeneous field of indeterminate and conflicting definitions, critiquing the discursive and material effects of various manifestations of colonialism from the first moments of invasion.

Postcoloniality denotes the incompleteness of colonial operations and the persistence of neo-colonial formations rather than signifying a temporal period “after colonialism” (Gikandi 49; Bhabha 6). Despite its elusive delineations, postcolonialism offers valuable resources of terminology, concepts, and an ideology of resistance. The thesis supports a cultural studies critique with ethnographic and sociological evidence, focussing on close readings of the novel at the same time as linking it to the broader social and historical world. The opening chapter investigates Meena’s desire for belonging and development of personal identifications; the relationship between class and race; and the complexities of post-imperial racism. The second chapter considers the phenomenon of diaspora; the Partition of India; and the association between memory, history, and narratives. Finally, the meanings of family and the “homely” and the “unhomely” are analysed in the concluding chapter.

Indian independence was forged upon the ordeal of geographic divisions on 14-15 August, 1947. A celebratory occasion was impaired by

the disintegration of former certainties and fratricidal conditions comparable to civil war. This “entangled inheritance” (Beniwal v) means that the origins of modern India are ambivalent and marked by selective remembrance. A Boundary Commission was responsible for determining the new cartography, led by Sir Cyril Radcliffe and composed of eight High Court judges equally derived from the Punjab and Bengal (Kamra 36). The Radcliffe Line absurdly created the state of Pakistan out of two areas of land separated by thousands of kilometres. The western part of divided Punjab became West Pakistan, along with other undivided provinces, while the eastern section of divided Bengal became East Pakistan. Syal’s novel solely concentrates on partitioned Punjab so the thesis does not consider experiences in Bengal.

Meena’s parents, Daljit and Shyam Kumar, survived the turmoil of Partition whereas their daughter only experiences it indirectly through their memories. The “nationalist fratricide” (Francisco 372) averted attention from the imperial ignominy preceding it and enabled Britain to maintain the illusion of hierarchical civilisations. Narratives such as *Anita and Me* perform the work that historiography often fails to accomplish by communicating suppressed histories and memories. The thesis explores the fictional portrayal of diasporic remembering and forgetting as they pertain to the legacies of British colonialism in India. These components are filtered through the first-person point-of-view of Meena and her growing recognition of the “past-present” (Bhabha 7).

The Kumars' habitation in Britain is framed by the concept of diaspora, highlighting its Greek etymology of dispersal or "sow over" (Cohen, *Global Diasporas* ix). Diaspora evokes attachments to multiple places and is a particular type of movement which is distinct from temporary and touristic travel. It refers to the internal luggage of history and memory that are transported when lives shift from one place to another. There are diverse expressions of Indian diaspora which need to be examined through other prisms such as gender and class. The permanence of settlement compels the Kumars to actively participate in their present social world and develop techniques for "dwelling-in-displacement" (Clifford, "Diasporas" 310). Even though she was born in Britain, Meena is a diasporic subject through her parents' refracted memories of India and her socialisation in "diaspora space" (Brah, *Cartographies* 16).

The novel contains descriptions of racial discrimination which undermine British claims to civilised benevolence and, concurrently, could bestow false comfort about the transcendence of racism in the present (Bromley 164). Race is an artificial construct which has real and devastating effects in producing and governing human bodies. Therefore, while there is no race, racism survives in the regimes of everyday life. Racial designations of "White" and "Black" are capitalised throughout the thesis to indicate their constructed character. The dualism of White and Black races was established when Europeans first came into contact with

non-Europeans and was perpetuated by scientific and philosophical disciplines.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, racial difference needs to be historicised due to the modification of ideas in response to individual sites and circumstances. Race is always entangled with ideas about class, gender, and sexuality, comprising “*differential racialisation*” (Brah, *Cartographies* 186). Regardless of altered understandings of race, the fundamental assumption of racism is the existence of incommensurable differences and usually involves hierarchies which deny the humanity of the other.

After the formal end of Empire, philosophies of race constituted in the context of imperialism were altered to racialise the nation (Hesse 5-6). The most common form of contemporary British racism combines essentialist beliefs about culture and skin colour (Modood 155-56). Furthermore, this racism has become more concealed and institutionalised since World War II. The uniquely British meaning of the term “Black” includes people of South Asian, African, and Caribbean heritage, acknowledging that there is no essential Black identity and that other subject positions interact with race in various manners. In the novel, Shyam understands that his family are seen as “the same colour” as Jamaicans (90). The British signifier of “Black” was always intended to unite those who are marginalised by the dominant culture, acting as a

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<sup>2</sup> The first recorded English utterance of the term “race” was in a poem written by William Dunbar in 1508 (Goldberg 62). David Goldberg notes that, from its earliest usage, the concept of race “has referred to those perceived, indeed, constituted as the other” (62).



political colour of alliance rather than simply denoting skin colour (Hall, “New Ethnicities” 252). It recognises a shared experience of racialisation, and, therefore, a strategic redeployment of essentialist discourses can assist in promoting a sense of solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

The denomination of “Black British” was devised by the British Caribbean Artists Movement in response to escalating racism and extremist politics in the late 1960s (Stein, “Cultures of Hybridity” 79). More recently, the term is accused of overlooking internal diversity and alienating South Asians. Despite the fracturing of Black British alliances, the category remains a valuable theoretical tool for examining the treatment of non-White individuals in *Anita and Me*. This analysis employs “British-Asian” when specifically discussing those with biological links to the Indian subcontinent. Neither of these categorical groupings represent homogenous or unified communities, nor do they refer to self-contained purities of “British,” “Black,” and “Asian.” Instead, they highlight histories of contact between previously quite distinct entities and the various mixtures engendered by colonisation. These provisional taxonomies are currently the most adequate expressions for alluding to diasporic histories, the visibility of being non-White, and the many gradients inflected in Britishness.

*Anita and Me* explores the complexities of racial and class otherness in Britain. Class is the convergence of wealth, status, and power, and

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<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the political potential of “a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism” (205) for purposes of unity and liberation.

lifestyle habits such as “smoking and bad luck” (56) are written on the body. The gulf between rich and poor was so pronounced in the nineteenth century that it seemed as if “two nations” co-existed. The thesis interprets class as “a set of invisible relationships” imbued in “*social space*” (Bourdieu, “What Makes a Social Class?” 3). Individual positions in this social space are established by accumulating variously valued forms of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital” 243). The valuation of capital is specific to context and region, and, in Tollington, belonging is measured by adherence to the local classed culture and regional accent and dialect. There is an unequal distribution of power and possession of different degrees of valued qualities even within classes. Such interior disparities account for intersectional differentiations where privilege in one capacity is modulated by disenfranchisement in others. While classes are not uniform units, Syal’s narrative emphasises that socioeconomic class continues to be a relevant factor impinging on lives and livelihoods.

*Anita and Me* challenges understandings of the novel of formation or development as a literary genre which first emerged in late eighteenth-century Germany. Genres are semiotic systems which invoke meaning through certain intertextual cues (Frow 24). The paramount intertextual trope of *Bildungsromane* is the growth of individuals as they search for meaning within social milieux. The typical structures of these narratives are commonly interpreted as featuring some kind of upheaval which

causes protagonists to undergo an arduous journey to be incorporated in the social order. Syal's text repudiates assimilation and installs cultural difference in a traditionally European style of writing. As the idea of formation implies a teleological state of being with a fixed end-point, the thesis employs the more fluid sense of development to suggest a process of constant change which is progressive and regressive at different stages. *Anita and Me* is a novel of transformation instead of formation, featuring an interaction between self and society as the heroine influences and is influenced by her surrounding environment (Stein, "Black British *Bildungsroman*" 101). In terms of generic transformation, the author transcends the Germanic origins of the *Bildungsroman* by experimenting with recognisable conventions.

Conservative definitions of *Bildungsromane* are based on notions of universal humanity which make bourgeois assumptions about self-autonomy and an ability to choose from a series of social options (Sammons, "Bildungsroman" 42). Marginalised subjects tend to experience more constrained opportunities due to the structural domination of hegemonic social groups. The social commentary and autobiographical nature of *Anita and Me* links it to the personality and nation of the author (Martini 24). Such a novel has effects on the public sphere beyond its literary status, both representing social change and contributing to the transformation of British culture as a published product. It initiates an interpretive relationship with readers and encourages them to reassess

knowledge and alter their social worlds (Frow 102-03). Western concepts of development are bound up with imperial discourses of degeneracy and Enlightenment ideas of progress which insinuate that development is intrinsically progressive. The success or failure of the protagonist's *Bildung* is irrelevant as there is still a sense of personal change.

Meena's navigation of an Anglocentric culture stresses that there is no instant separation between colonial control and the political decolonisation of India. Colonial discourses construct the colonised as eternal children in need of paternalistic authority, a concomitant othering of children and colonised as "lower-order beings" and "not fully human" (Stoler 150-51). This infantilisation is also a gendered discourse of effeminate dependency. In depicting the development of a postcolonial individual, *Anita and Me* challenges colonial myths of perpetual childhood. Syal's heroine is united with a collective struggle to combat the colonial fragmentation of selves and histories (Lima, "Revolutionary" 44). Meena epitomises an insider-outsider compound by sliding between the extremes of these viewpoints and eventually rejecting any complete accommodation within the dominant social order.

All cultures are interrelated and deterritorialised from original sources. The theory of Black Britons existing between two cultures discounts this reality and presumes that culture is a possession instead of a fluid meaning system which involves tradition and innovation (Helweg 360; Karner 166). Code-switching is a regular occurrence stemming from

the multiple speaking sites of all subjects. Nevertheless, these sites are invested in asymmetrical networks of power, with some historically maligned and others centralised. Meena's "anger and yearning and violent mood swings" (57) derive from the devaluation of her familial life in Britain. She increasingly becomes adept at "situational ethnicity," in which the configurations of social spaces affect her perceptions and capacity to act (Okamura 463). Distinctive beliefs and behaviours are practiced by human actors and are not natural environmental growths. Moreover, colonial inventories determine what is now recognised as "Indian." The thesis acknowledges both intermingling and difference with a concept of alterity as "an apartness that stands as a precondition of dialogue" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 12). Such a paradigm concedes that difference is relational and dependent on perspective, and rejects technologies of inferiority and superiority.

Syal's novel further complicates the *Bildungsroman* form by concentrating on female selfhood. John H. Smith claims that *Bildung* is a male prerogative of inauguration in the patriarchal symbolic order, and is inexorably unfulfilled as it is structured by repression of desire for the female other (220-21). The female novel of development highlights the gender biases of genre theory and conveys alternative possibilities for human metamorphosis. Gender roles can inhibit female enrichment and self-exploration is typically more circumscribed and confined in space than for males. Meena experiences a racialised mode of patriarchy and a

patriarchal mode within her family and social world. The privileging of the sovereign self is also androcentric as females often gain a sense of identity through relationships (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 10).

Western feminism usually attacks the family as an oppressive institution, whereas the Kumars are a crucial support system for Meena in defying racial interpellation. Reconnecting with her family is fundamental to her evolution, without denying the social education she receives when learning how to integrate the competing demands of “desire and duty” (181). This *Bildungsroman* disputes views of females as passive, frivolous creatures who are acted upon and ends with optimism about Meena’s emancipation from a masculine and imperial version of *Bildung*. She resists racialised patriarchal norms at the same time as her mind is partly decolonised, a resistance that requires a certain refusal of the society in which she is implicated.

Nations are historically powerful narratives which emerge from a wilful forgetting of divisions and imposition of unity (Anderson 204). Individuals who have excessive racial and cultural difference are excluded from the in-group of national belonging, deprived of the basic acknowledgement of existence and eliminated from history. Syal contests such exclusions by placing British-Asian characters in prominent positions within her own imagined nation. Meena is wounded by speech and actions that mark her as extrinsic, while exposing the fragile suppression of diversity and “*internal liminality*” (Bhabha 149) of the nation. British

identities rely on myths of territory and ancestry to inspire loyalty to an imaginary homeland. The abstract nation cannot be represented in material form so the territorial homeland acts as a symbol of its presence (Salecl 217). A primary binding agent is a sense of common culture which is disseminated by the media and education systems, and, hence, cultural products can stimulate public debates and shift understandings.

Individual nations depend on emotional attachments that inspire citizens to manufacture and support already constituted myths. Consequently, a great deal of labour is required to camouflage fissures and sustain everyday nation-work (Gunew, *Haunted Nations* 26). Homi Bhabha accentuates contradictory tendencies between the pedagogic portrayal of fixed homogeneity and the performative involvement of humans in producing the nation (147-48). Nationalists frequently imagine the nation as a feminine possession to be defended or conquered by heterosexual masculinity. Collective stories personify the British homeland as a paternal or maternal figure and citizens as family members. Culture and nation are seen to reside within Britons from birth instead of being appropriated through socialisation. Familial imagery suggests biological ties and therefore interlopers in the familial home threaten to contaminate bloodlines by introducing new genetic material. Discourses of biological fixity belie the malleability of making national meaning and the various affections competing with national attachments.

Due to Meera Syal's conflation of Britain and England, the dissertation considers the interlocking phenomena of regionalised British and English identities. Britain is a "multinational state" (McCrone 587) comprising Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and England, as well as many other national groupings from immigration. Since the formal genesis of Great Britain in 1707, consolidated in 1800 with the incorporation of Ireland, most Britons have had plural national identities. As Linda Colley argues, a unifying sense of British identity was "superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other" (6). Regardless of citizenship realities, Britons were united by their Whiteness and belief that they were a "master-race" (Nünning 149). This racial vision of nation demanded that flesh unequivocally testify to belonging. Britain is conventionally characterised by an imperial role and allegiance to institutions such as the monarchy, thus the loss of Empire entails a diminished identity foundation (McCrone 588). In comparison, a sense of English identity is more ambiguous and difficult to define. The meanings ascribed to this collective self have evolved markedly over time and overlap with the domain of Britishness.

For many years, English nationality focussed externally on foreign conquests and the "inner empire" which established Britain (Kumar, *Making* xi). Discourses about Englishness do sometimes embrace racial hybridity, as encapsulated by Daniel Defoe's eighteenth-century poetic proclamations that the English are "a mongrel half-bred race" and a "true-



born Englishman's a contradiction" (194-95). Syal's fictional Midlands village of Tollington features a localised ethnicity which is loosely based on certain myths about the past, speaking the English language, and an implicit Whiteness. Ethnicity describes the practice of creating group boundaries based on perceptions of shared ancestry and culture.

Differences between England and Britain are accentuated in some scenarios and collapsed when encountering racial others. English and British identities are inseparable, and the thesis is more concerned with a post-imperial racial ethnicity in which region and nation overlap.

Colonialism dissolved the hierarchy between inside and outside and resulted in a permanently entwined relationship of exchange. In normalising the presence of British-Asians, *Anita and Me* transforms notions of Britain and its imperial past. National narratives are immensely powerful and are the dominant mechanism organising the world. Nation-states continue to control territorial boundaries through immigration laws and individuals remain situated in national contexts. Shyam and Daljit retain connections to the nation they leave behind, albeit remaking and grafting it onto new national identifications. As long as the nation exists as a structural principle, it is prescient for outsiders to open up spaces within these shifting structures and to recognise the benefits of belonging without assimilating. The idea of nation is not repugnant in itself and what matters most is the type of nation imagined. The Kumars engender "national

interruption" by disturbing the capitalist circuit of the nation which produces a singular "people" (Axel, "National Interruption" 236, 240, 244).

Imperialism imparts "discursive repertoires" (Frankenberg 140) which continue to be invoked after decolonisation. In the novel, class inequalities are compounded by historically engrained racial anxiety and nationalism. The vast scale of migration from former colonies instigated immense changes to the demographics and imagined ideas of Britain and England. However, the magnitude of this settlement is exaggerated and non-White citizens were substantially outnumbered by migrants from Europe and Ireland. Daljit and Shyam Kumar are attracted to Britain after Indian independence and Partition, and are part of a long history of settlement from Africa, the Caribbean, and India since the seventeenth century. These earlier populations were small, concentrated in particular areas, and often returned to their countries of departure (Spencer 3). A post-war island mentality continued to view Black inhabitants as belatedly appearing after indigenous White occupants, and the thesis emphasises an altered sense of national identity caused by twentieth-century Commonwealth migration.

Tollington is a site marked by insularity and a heightened awareness of borders, a "contact zone" in which British colonialism has brought together people who would otherwise be separated (Pratt 6). The thesis transposes Mary Louise Pratt's terminology from the colony to the post-imperial metropole. The ambivalent, "sweet-sour" (305) friendship

between Meena and Anita Rutter is a principal analogy for the British contact zone. Wherever it occurs, colonialism is never a simple history of conquest, and Tollington subjects collide, co-exist, and are shaped by their environmental closeness. This exchange is undeniably disproportionate and the villagers are primarily changed by the fact of contact as it dispels commonly disseminated knowledge about Indians. Racism is a complex phenomenon and certain characters are demonstrated to be inconsistent in their discrimination. Tolerance and racism are “*similar* practices of spatial power” (Hage 91) as the language underlying middle-class multiculturalism is also premised on fantasies of national ownership and precarious extensions of tolerance. Blatant racism is just one expression in a spectrum of manifest and latent relations to power.

Despite the working-class marginality and fictionality of Tollington, it is a “tiny, teeming and intimate” (250) microcosm of many prevailing attitudes towards Black Britons. The retraction of colonial frontiers instigated a shrinking of the British world and an insular mentality that was now defined against the Empire (Webster, *Englishness* 8). Turning inwards, Britons were forced to scrutinise themselves just as their collective constitution was altering. Fears about social and economic changes were transferred to conspicuous Black figures who were made responsible for the perceived decline. This declinist discourse neglected the uneven geographical conditions of prosperity in southern and eastern areas (Kearney 294). Britain’s economic deterioration and diminished

global control was countered by cultural creativity. Tollington is mostly isolated from the revolutionary potential of subcultural influences and Meena later compares “The Sixties” to a “mythical country” (164).

From its earliest formulation, the novel of development aspired to develop the reader. Syal’s narrative has ethical value in revealing the exercise of power in national imaginaries and galvanising a “community of readers” (Durrant 11). It participates in the social engineering of British education curriculums, shaping and educating readers as the protagonist undergoes a journey of growth. The novel is dedicated to the author’s family and daughter and thus involves an intergenerational transfer of information to overcome the deprivation of history suffered by the heroine. The opening piece of writing is untitled and structurally separated from the first chapter, existing as an ambiguous paratext which operates “between the inside and the outside” of the text (Genette 2). According to Gérard Genette, prefaces act as an authorial “statement of intent” (221) and aim “to ensure that the text is read properly” (197). This preface prepares the reader to question historical facts and colonial stereotypes, with the ironic narrative voice mocking common myths about Indian immigrants in “village garb” (9). Susanne Reichl identifies the speaker as a “threshold narrator” who acts as “a gatekeeper” (161) between fiction and world.

Representations arise from embodied locations and the social position of an author is highly important (Haraway 188). *Anita and Me*

contains autobiographical traces and many components of Syal's own life-history, including growing up in a Midlands mining town and having parents who migrated to Britain from the Punjab and Delhi after Indian Partition. Although autobiographical tendencies are widespread in *Bildungsromane*, Syal's metafictional reference to "mythology" (10) accentuates that this is a creative fabrication. Fiction enables her to symbolise a personal history within a wider history of Britain, unearthing the deep roots of imperialism in the lives of individuals and nationalities. Commercial success does raise the undesirable possibility of "the postcolonial exotic" (Huggan 13, 264) in which otherness is confined by the safety of paper and ink. There are slippages between author and protagonist from the beginning of the novel when it is unclear whether the first-person subject in the preface is the author or Meena Kumar speaking as her adult self. The confident voice foreshadows the resolution of the narrative when the heroine achieves a provisional sense of belonging, and thus inverts the typical linear chronology of *Bildungsromane*.

The socio-historical analysis of *Anita and Me* connects the world of the text with the context it represents and the environment in which it is inscribed, arguing that "text and beyond-text" are inseparable (Genette 407). The novel is a re-membering of the immediate aftermath of decolonisation in India and postcolonial citizenship in Britain. This writing testifies to personal stories at the margins of public memory and historiography, and is a mythology which is deeply influenced by

historical realities as the author seeks to write a "*relation* to history" (Durrant 11). Meena's development and decolonisation are embedded in a post-imperial world of past exploitation and present change. Similarly, the external societies inside and outside the novel are transformed by racial otherness, despite widespread resistance to such altered conditions. The thesis explores the dyadic transformation of self and society in relation to an imperial past which refuses to be past.

## Chapter I

### Uninhabitable Zones: Abjection and Belonging

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There is a climactic scene in *Anita and Me* which foregrounds the intertwined matters of class, race, and gender, when a White adolescent male is rendered immobile by his social status and confused desire for the despised dark-skinned other. Sam Lowbridge plaintively questions why he is unable to escape misfortune: “how come? How come I can’t?” (314). Meanwhile, Meena Kumar refuses to be objectified and claims power over her former friend and tormentor by declining his racialised desire. It is a scene of realisation and role-reversal in which the search for belonging featured throughout the novel culminates in an uneasy resolution. In this dénouement, a “dominant ethnicity” of White Britishness still prevails in the broader society and allows members of this “ethnic core” to create the nation in their own image (Kaufmann 3-4).

The text is characterised by location and dislocation when Meena seeks “to feel complete, to belong” (10) before realising that *incompletion* is an enriching status. Belonging is an extremely emotional pursuit that is “not just be-ing, but longing” (Bell 1). It is stimulated by painful yearning, an aspiration to be something else, and discontent with current circumstances (Probyn 6). Belonging is a constantly fluctuating mirage which can never be finally achieved. Instead of finding ways to fit into a clearly delineated position or assume a static place in the social order

without changing the order itself, Meena must assert belonging through resisting assimilation and the containment of her difference.

The novel details a learning process as the protagonist is awakened to her difference and is racialised by others. Racialisation is the interpellation of individuals as racial subjects when raced meanings are projected onto their bodies (Alexander and Knowles 11-12). Meena's developing subjectivity is impacted by the encounter between self-definition and the constraints of imposed identities. She cannot be consigned to a subject position unless she makes a personal investment in the position (Hall, "Who Needs Identity?" 6). She eventually learns to locate herself in "the gap" (10) between explicit expression and implicit thought, an unfixed no-place that is richly fulfilling. This state of otherness infers that she is capably equipped to detect the nuances of human behaviour and body language, learning about the disparity between external surfaces and hidden subtleties from an early age.

Meena's quest for belonging is primarily about drawing upon personal resources and acquiring self-acceptance rather than gaining acceptance from others. She oscillates between shades of belonging and initially feels dissatisfied with the present, wanting "much more ... that I could not name" (37). Belonging is always conditional, partial, and ambiguous in devising a personalised approach to group membership (Song 58-59). It is expressed through social and spatial relations and therefore ought to be distinguished from the possessive individualism of



property acquisition. External acceptance is undeniably important, as in Charles Taylor's "politics of recognition," but to focus solely on validation by others removes empowerment from the individual. Even so, Meena is a social creature who depends on a measure of environmental stability and acceptance, soon finding that her family is a more supportive source of belonging than the imperialistic Tollington.

*Anita and Me* highlights the co-constitution of race and class in a stratified British society, depicting the upheaval of economic restructuring in industrialised northern regions and the transfer of prosperity to London and south-east England. Loss of employment in the manufacturing and industrial sectors occurred at the same time as settlement from former colonies became a more noticeable and sizeable contingent. The working-class characters benefit from racial advantages while being economically and politically disenfranchised. Whiteness is a relative variable, as seen with the treatment of the Irish as an uncivilised race. Ruth Frankenberg defines Whiteness as "a location of structural advantage," "a 'standpoint,'" and "a set of cultural practices" (1). Despite her class marginality, Anita Rutter deploys the language of contagion against perceived others and warns Meena that "yow'll catch summat" from the visiting "gippos" (102). Whiteness is thus heterogeneous and operates as a "symbolic field of accumulation" (Hage 232). Individuals without property were deprived of electoral rights for most of British history and consequently were excluded from national citizenship.

The “second British Empire” of the nineteenth century advanced theories of human variation in the interdependent fields of class, gender, and race (Bridge and Fedorowich 4; Hall, *Civilising* 16). Similar labels and imagery were attached to colonial others and to the working-classes in Britain, inferring that both groups were primitive forms of humanity. Moreover, women were racialised and non-White people were feminised. Imperial activities and fears of racial contagion heightened the defence of female bodies and the female nation from the sexuality of Black men. The perpetuation of a “code of breeding” in eighteenth-century Britain was a type of class racism which divided people according to allegedly inherited qualities (Cohen, “Perversions” 64). This ideological model linked promiscuity with the lower orders and especially with unfeminine working-class women, such as the disparagement of Anita as “a slag” (240). The discourse could be reversed, as demonstrated by the working-class Mrs Lowbridge when she makes a sarcastic comment about aristocratic “inbreeding” (168). The code of breeding was applied in colonies, and, in turn, racial discourses travelled back into the metropole and re-shaped class ideas in a circuit of ideological exchange.

Contemporary anxieties about the British nation illustrate its inherent instability and an inability to protect it from external influences. Ghassan Hage argues that there are two modes of national belonging, one of passive incorporation and the other of “governmental belonging” (45-46). The latter is a territorial possessiveness which espouses rhetoric of

grounded host and nomadic guest and the prerogative to manage national space, always posing the retraction of visiting privileges. In the novel, such nationalism appeals to a Churchillian spirit of defending a “besieged” (191) nation from “outside forces” (175). There are early signs of governmental belonging with anxieties about the size of the Indian contingent visiting the Kumars and beliefs that “we had somehow managed to bring every one of them over here” (29). It is this governmental belonging which gradually intensifies and is finally articulated in physical violence.

The start of the novel maps the classed geography of Tollington and its different levels of privilege. A cluster of terraced houses is personified as forming “uneven teeth ... spread into a gap-toothed smile” (11), teeth being the most prominent physical sign of human disadvantage. The “bigger and grander” houses are close to the aesthetically pleasing expanse of “flat green fields” (11). These “po-faced mansions” (11) are also situated at the top of a hill and allow an elevated perspective of the township. The act of looking and ability to see from above are class indicators of height, site, and sight. Finally, at the bottom of the hill are “two-up-two-downs” (11) and “untended meadows populated with the carcasses of abandoned agricultural machinery” (11-12). These properties are without the conveniences of modern bathrooms and are cemeteries for previously useful equipment.

Living costs are inexpensive in Tollington as it lies outside urban heartlands and “civilisation” (19). Here, civilisation is a classed construct referring to modernity and a wealth of economic and cultural capital. Tollington is marginalised from the iconic southern countryside of English identity which excludes the working-class regions of the Midlands and northern England (Kumar, *Making* 211). After operating a “productive enterprise” (14), Tollington is now an unproductive affliction on the rest of the capitalist nation-state, its topography revealing a history of dignified purpose and a present condition of decay. Nonetheless, this pessimism neglects the entrepreneurship and regeneration offered by new citizens from former colonies. The Kumar parents view the village as a scene of opportunities albeit remaining ambivalent about the social education their daughter receives.

Tollington has “a halcyon past” (143) in the minds of its inhabitants and the local mine is a “crumbling monument” (143) to this distant past. The mine is an anachronism from another era and testament to the unbreachable divide between past and present. It was a central source of income and prestige by bonding the villagers together and contributing to national prosperity. Such “economic nationalism” was an important dimension of British identity and the appeal for unity across classes (McCrone 590). Mining both fuelled imperial industries and signalled the male domination of the earth in Tollington (McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 115). A working-class group identity is forged by occupation but

dependence on a single industry makes the village extremely vulnerable and unprepared when the economy shifts.

The disappearance of the mine at the end of the 1950s has flow-on effects for other aspects of village life, including the loss of farms, the departure of many families, and the shattering of optimism. Economics are imbued with an affective dimension of “grief and confusion” (15). The spirit of Tollington is corroded as “the mine and the village had been as intertwined as lovers, grateful lovers” (14). The mine is closed due to the overwhelming forces of globalised deindustrialisation, while on the local level it seems an inexplicable mystery. Economic decline is related to the loss of colonial possessions and thus mourning for an imperial past excludes the Kumars. Despite the disadvantage in the village, there is a sense of shared fellowship and solidarity from “stoic muscular resistance” (67), making working-class identity a positive source of camaraderie.

Nineteenth-century British class boundaries were reinforced by interpretations of women who lived in urban slums, and working women were stigmatised as racial degenerates for disregarding the separation of the female private sphere and the male public sphere (Skeggs 2; McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 42). From Victorian times, gender relations in colliery villages were acutely divided between mines and unpaid domestic labour. Gendered positions in Tollington are profoundly altered by the loss of jobs performed by men and the opening of a factory that only employs women. The narrator suggests that women are preferred because

they have “nimble fingers” and “would not make demands or complain” (19). The factory management exploits the desperation of working-class women after the redundancy of male breadwinners, the ironic narrating voice claiming that they “would do piecework and feel grateful” (19). Factories were considered to be the realm of unskilled “women’s work,” justifying the low wages paid to female employees (Massey 203). The colloquial collective noun for these women, “the Ballbearings Committee” (19), connotes masculine toughness and role-reversal. Daljit Kumar remarks that their socially obsolete husbands “must feel like ghosts” (20) without a work role to define their identities. The altered gender roles mirror the changes in other industrial British towns in the aftermath of World War II, and anxieties about national effeminacy were further aroused by the loss of Empire (Webster, *Imagining Home* 68-69).

In Tollington, the Kumar family lives in a cottage that is “halfway down the hill, standing on the corner of the crossroads” (12). Their residence is located in an in-between zone, as suggested by the geographical terms of “halfway,” “corner,” and “crossroads.” The Kumars’ accommodation was previously occupied by miners, the heart of the village, and is clustered with other miners’ cottages around “the Yard” (12). The Yard is a “communal” (24) and shared zone of “copresence” (Pratt 7) in which dialogical transactions occur, a space where diverse influences meet and fuse together. While most characters are genial towards the Kumar family, the landscape reveals traces of colonial race-

thinking such as the “grinning piccaninny” (20) image on a packet of sweets and the name of Deirdre Rutter’s dog, Nigger. These instances of bigotry are so normalised and embedded in social life that most villagers are oblivious to their impact, illustrating experiential disparities of “a gulf in reality” (Rushdie, “New Empire” 134). The grocery store owner’s humorous attempts to convert the Kumars to Methodism echo a darker history of missionary activity. Mr Ormerod’s ideas about a monolithic “abroad” (21) conflate heterogeneity into an identical mass as if Africans are interchangeable with Indians. Shyam and Daljit Kumar discreetly resist these affronts and retain a cordial distance from their direct environment by regarding Tollington as “temporary lodgings” (263). Distance is a self-protective action which aids their efforts to “swallow down anger and grief” (288) and maintain diasporic links to India.

The Kumars are middle-class due to their language skills, values, and education. Meena’s racialisation interferes with her class status but her accumulated cultural capital endows her with opportunities for social agency. Like so many adult migrants of the post-war generations, Shyam sacrifices job-satisfaction and living conditions to shelter his family. He is prepared to channel “unfulfilled desires” (110) into his child’s future and replace disappointment with the revitalising energies of Punjabi “soul food” (61). His Indian university degree is deemed substandard and a “damn waste of time in this country” (84). British education continues to be valued as the pinnacle of civilisation for ideologically training people in

national ideals and converting them into citizens. Distrust of foreign qualifications is also a pretext which masks racial discrimination (Ratcliffe 89). Shyam's notions of "the right influences" (250) are implicitly classed, as are Daljit's instructions to "take the best from their culture, not the worst" (53). This selection and adaption of cultural materials is the transculturation that occurs in all contact zones (Pratt 6).

The Kumars ironically adopt more qualities of the class-based category of British "civilisation" than their Tollington compatriots. The imperial culture imported to India was a medley of middle-class traits and values which camouflaged impoverishment in the self-constructed metropole. Daljit and Shyam's adverse reactions to their environment are connected to their classed preconceptions and experiences of racialisation. They view Anita as a carrier of imperial Whiteness and attempt to guide their daughter away from her contaminating class and racial influence. Shyam's discomfort with his exoticisation by the local women and their "loose behaviour" (180) is an example of the "neo-Victorian" ethos that is prevalent among many British-Asians (Hand 13). The working-class citizens of Tollington are foreigners from the perspectives of the "foreign" (29) Kumar family.

*Anita and Me* depicts Meena's development between the ages of nine and eleven in a threshold period of pre-adolescence. Childhood and adolescence are typical starting-points for *Bildungsroman* texts, regarded as the pivotal ages in which the meaning of a life can be located (Moretti 4).



Nevertheless, popular discourses commonly portray children as unformed humans who are immature, irrational, and disorderly. Colonial discourses also view childhood as a primitive and subordinate stage which requires adult discipline (Nandy 14-15). Meena's childhood learning experiences provide the foundations for her future and signify a beginning instead of an ending. She acquires cultural attributes to become a functioning member of society as well as being an active agent who contributes to making meaning. She selectively adapts cultural characteristics to balance "*self-determination*" with the "*demands of socialisation*" (Moretti 15).

When Meena seeks to be absorbed into the nation, she enters a symbolic order haunted by a colonial father and tries to ignore the feeling that she does "not live under the same sky as most other people" (197). She longs to be "complete" (84) and part of a clearly demarcated group before she gains the confidence and "boldness of self" (86) to assert claims to territory. Completeness infers personal fulfilment and not a homogenous identity as she concedes that "there was a corner of me that would be forever not England" (112). This statement obliquely subverts the equation between an English body and English territory in Rupert Brooke's poem, "The Soldier," which proclaims, "if I should die, think only this of me: / that there's some corner of a foreign field / that is for ever England" (23). Meena feels that she is unconventionally English despite "breathing English air" (Brooke 23) for her entire life. Rather than

identifying with a specific place, she defines herself ambiguously and negatively as “not England.”

Identity is developed through recognising one’s difference from and similarity to others. The title of the novel establishes a parallel relationship between two characters by juxtaposing the reference to “me” with the named figure of “Anita.” While Anita is named, it is Meena, the titular “me,” who is the narrating centre of the text. She is defined as the self, disputing the argument that the “me” in the title is an “embryonic variant” of “Meena” (Schoene-Harwood 165). Meena decides every aspect of the novel and has the privilege of first-person narration and story-telling role. The reader only grasps fragments of Anita’s story which, even then, are filtered through Meena’s subjective interpretations. However, the heroine is not a unified self and her identifications involve only temporary attachments to subject positions. She is changeable and conflicted, and her point-of-view slides between the voice of a child and a knowing adult voice reflecting on her childhood.

Meena’s aspiration to accelerate time and become an adult is a form of generic self-consciousness. The adult narrator gazing backwards seeks to decipher a disjointed past and integrate significant childhood experiences with the present self (Fischer 208; LaSeur 26-27). In doing so, the machinery of memory modifies the past and evokes uncertainty about the truth-quality of the conveyed childhood. Like all subjects, Meena is ultimately incapable of full self-knowledge or controlling her unconscious

impulses (Radstone and Hodgkin 19). She attempts to stabilise identity even as the narration risks inconsistencies in a “highly manipulated performance of the self” (Knowles 112). The unreliable narrator signals the novel’s awareness of its own fictionality and the heroine’s reinventions of self through the appropriation of indirect diasporic histories.

Anita and her younger sister, Tracey, are both portrayed as Meena’s shadow selves. These characters all experience alterity and abjection, excised from legitimate life, while subjected to different modes of power. Sigmund Freud claims that the double is a figure of uncanny terror due to its resemblance to a long-discarded earlier mental stage (236). In this sense, Anita represents an earlier psychological disposition which Meena gradually finds distasteful. One of the causes of their failed friendship is Anita’s lack of social capital as Daljit and Shyam want their daughter to develop profitable connections. Her contact with Anita is a major source of tension although there are strong underlying bonds between parents and child. Their rituals of argument and reconciliation are even comforting, with disputes adhering to “the same pattern, this fierce outburst and snapping confrontation, followed by repentant cuddles” (250). The household is an inclusive place where Meena feels “anonymous” (106) and gains respite from racial scrutiny and the politics of declaring oppositional identities. It is also a location of gendered labour where she is expected to learn the responsibilities of a dutiful wife.

The symbolic character of Tracey Rutter personifies the suffering of working-class impoverishment and is a more extreme version of Meena's tormented self. Her liminality permits abject qualities to be displaced onto her "dark and pinched" (46) body, and she acts as a "symbolic site" of Meena and Anita's ambivalent friendship (Schoene-Harwood 165). Tracey is a "thin, sickly child" (46) whose poor health mirrors, and likely originates from, the maladies pervading her family unit. Her endeavours to cling to family members are repelled with indifference and repugnance when her mother and sister escape bleak domestic realities by fleeing outside. She is "the silent trotting shadow whimpering at her big sister's heels" (46) and is perpetually waiting for relatives to return home. Her "faded" (46) and ill-fitting garments convey signs of neglect and are the residue material from Anita's childhood.

Meena is uncomfortable about participating in Tracey's victimisation because it echoes the taunting treatment she has also received. An unresolved facet of the novel is the fleeting suggestion that Tracey is either physically or sexually abused, her thighs bruised with "the imprint of ten cruel, angry fingers" (142). Meena's decision to forget this image is reproduced at the narrative level of erasure and is necessary for her to overcome negative energies within herself. As Meena emulates Anita, Tracey deteriorates into a ghost-like and "transparent" (300) figure who is sacrificed so that Meena can survive. Despite being the ultimate state of imperceptible Whiteness, transparency is a sign of her frailty. Her

symbolic death alludes to the fears of self-declared “native” Britons that they will be displaced by immigrants.

Friendship with Anita plays a crucial role in Meena’s developing subjectivity and is founded on uncertainty and “exclusivity” (17) when Anita’s gaze presumes an entitlement to judge Meena’s body. Her appraisal appears to result in approval as she smiles with “radiance and forgiveness” (17). Nevertheless, it is clear that the penetrating stare, hesitant pause, and ambiguous judgement will govern their future relationship. Her “forgiveness” (17) implies that she is in a position of authority and that Meena has committed an offence. Meena’s social crime is lacking Whiteness and this moment of forgiveness is the advent of her racialisation by Anita. Even so, she always has an option to return the gaze and their friendship contains a range of multifaceted power imbalances. Unlike Anita, Meena benefits from a stable family and middle-class values such as a high regard for education.

Although Anita is visibly self-assured and gains many advantages from White capital, she is riven with vulnerabilities and lacks “civilisational authority” (Gikandi 68). Her family circumstances are volatile and her life chances are limited by working-class socioeconomics. Embodiment and respectability are public signs of status and critical to class assessments. Impoverished and Black individuals cannot efface their bodies and so are unable to attain the heights of rational civilisation (Mohanram 37). Females are especially expected to protect their

reputations, and, hence, Anita's "foul mouth" (38) and sexual deviance fail to conform to the respectable femininity of "nice girls" (84). Similarly, in the temporal setting, her father's tattoos are bodily stigmata of his standing in social space.

The pivotal friendship of the text is coloured by an ambivalence of "repulsion and attraction" (187). Anita is a "passport to acceptance" (148) and embodies "the forbidden" (17), raising the prospect of "forbidden" intermixture in befriending Meena. Meena admires her uninhibited rebelliousness and because she is ostensibly a vessel of Englishness. Ironically, Anita's Italian paternity could also cast her as an un-English outsider. Meena is initially eager to conform to the standards of her White peers and prove that she is "one of them" (97), rejecting the British-Asian characters of Pinky and Baby and the four other "non-white children" (118) at school. She experiments with different identifications but surrenders control when her mind is partly colonised. Regardless of her proficient mimicry of Anita, Meena cannot evade physical or cultural difference and her mimicry is therefore imperfect and resistant to subjugation (Bhabha 86). Her transition process entails the disturbance of a fantasy-world by the force of materiality, destabilising the fantasies of a childhood inscribed by the fantasies of colonial authority. At the same time, the novel remains a fictional fantasy of the author.

Meena avoids "day-to-day bullying" (118) by imitating Tollington youths, deliberately exaggerating her Midlands accent and dialect when

encountering an uncertain situation or rebelling against her parents. Her “authentic Yard accent” (122) is self-consciously rehearsed as she manipulates “the politics of everyday life” (Puar 26). She is ambivalent about the Indian subcontinent and alternates between desperately hungering for knowledge and evading this genealogy to pretend she is “someone else” (211). In addition, her knowledge is selectively mediated by her parents and is more Punjabi than “Indian.” The Kumars are secular Hindu-Sikhs and do not observe some common religious customs like having a domestic Hindu shrine. Their Punjabi ethnicity is a dynamic practice of inventing and reinventing conventions rather than a rigid entity transmitted between generations (Fischer 195). It is a process of activating “*real or perceived differences of ancestry, culture and language ... in social transactions*” (Fenton 6).

Meena’s imaginative fantasies are a method of escaping reality and the belief that she is “too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench” (149-50). Despite this imperfect simulation, her recognition that she exceeds both positions challenges the notion of authenticity. Operating across a continuum of locations reconfigures the boundaries of Indian and Tollington ethnicities and creates an unnameable new subjectivity which surpasses the fixity of “British-Asian.” The boredom of residing in a small town also makes Meena crave drama and a “tortured soul” (20) until she later discovers the injuries of ostracism. She generally has an affectionate relationship with

her mother and father, and a straightforward clash of generations fails to occur. There is a distinction between intergenerational conflict and intergenerational difference (Brah, *Cartographies* 42). Daljit and Shyam's strict parenting is partly motivated by the judgements of other British-Asians, especially as family honour is measured by the behaviour of daughters (Bhatti 55). Moreover, they are extremely conscious of representing "the whole Indian nation" (45) and behaving with decorum to prove that they are an asset to Britain. Their acceptance within Tollington is conditional on their class status and partial Anglicisation (Branach-Kallas 140).

Tollington adolescents prioritise rebellion and, somewhat contradictorily, the art of appearing adult-like. In a "*youth culture of peers*" (Baumann, *Contesting Culture* 146), Meena experiments with image and identity beyond parental sanctions and disproves stereotypes about authentic Indian conduct. She indulges in the "wild" (200) behaviour deemed inappropriate for Indian girls, adopting the conventionally masculine and colonial trait of exploration and disliking "frills and flowers" (17). Her misbehaviour contests the demure Indian femininity of Pinky and Baby, whose feminine submission is exaggerated by their names. Meena's parents are frequently preoccupied with diasporic concerns and her disobedience is a means of harnessing their attention and achieving control. Daljit and Shyam fear that their daughter will become an unrecognisable "urchin" (53) from imitating her White peers.



Forbidden conduct and taboo subjects are appealing to children in learning the perimeters of boundaries, and Meena also transgresses the boundaries of race, gender, and nation. She is “oppositionally active” (Puar 27) in rebelling against the authority of parents and dominant knowledge about Indians. Such inappropriate coding of behaviour establishes a sense of personal integrity when confronted with unpalatable expectations (Ballard, “Emergence” 33).

The protagonist of *Anita and Me* increasingly mobilises various identities according to the requirements of situations. This mobilisation is not always a conscious decision and can occur as a naturalised habit. Meena is exposed to a range of cultural and religious traditions throughout her childhood, including Christian theology, the specialised Punjabi labels for different relatives, and the Hindu festival of Diwali.<sup>4</sup> Diwali is remade in the Tollington environment and combined with the British Christmas convention of present-giving. These allegedly disparate practices are brought together effortlessly and equip Meena with a vast array of techniques for navigating the world. England is her reference point when she imagines Indian streets as “basically English streets with a few cows lounging around” (32). She is not fluent in Punjabi and has only limited knowledge of her parents’ histories. English is her core method of communication, unlike their fluency in both English and Punjabi. Daljit and Shyam are thus also hybridised from the British colonisation of India.

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<sup>4</sup> Diwali is a Hindu Festival of Light which coincides with harvests and celebrates the end of the monsoon season in India.

As Meena becomes estranged from the dominant *ethnie*, she embraces her subcontinental heritage as a difference which cannot be suppressed.

Punjabi ethnicity is “a way of seeing the world” and is invested in “biographically grounded *structures of feeling*” (Karner 43).

Like Meena, every student adopts different roles in the “two worlds” (204) of school and home. Cultural capital is the unacknowledged currency in educational institutions and success is determined by conforming to the hidden curriculum. Meena does not have to consciously acquire such personal competencies as her home environment already contains school-sanctioned resources. Therefore, although she is racially alienated, she is more prepared for schooling than working-class White Britons like Anita Rutter and Sam Lowbridge. Her family’s “destiny” and “legacy” (59) are incomparable to the “apparent dead ends” (59) of their neighbours. Meena gradually focusses on achieving “the dreaded eleven-plus,” a “national entrance exam” (213) which acts as a gate-keeping mechanism for maintaining class divisions. Such academic qualifications are the “objectification of cultural capital” (Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital” 247). The exam has broader significance for Meena as a metaphor for her parents’ sacrifices in leaving India. Daljit and Shyam deem education to be a measure of security when surrounded by insecurity, an attitude that is shaped by their past poverty as refugees of Indian Partition.

Education is particularly important with the transition from an industrial and manufacturing economy to an information economy. The

demolition of the local school signifies the low value accorded to the working-class and the annihilation of opportunities to break intergenerational cycles of impoverishment. Sam is a “wild boy” (49) who is both admired and abhorred in Tollington. His criminality eventually escalates from the petty crime of “shoplifting and nicking bikes” (49) to the serious offence of physically assaulting a British-Asian man. Despite his capacity for vicious aggression, Sam makes exceptions for Meena and her family. His ambivalent attraction to Meena has undertones of colonial desire and culminates in a tentative kiss. However, she is in a commanding position when their mouths meet and her action is an almost charitable gesture that reverses traditional race-gender power dynamics.

Apart from Sam, Meena is ignored and rejected by other boys in the village. She is excluded from Anita’s flirtation with a group of teenage boys because her skin colour and Indian heritage make her an “unimaginable” (105) match for a White male. Such conflicting male responses are related to the contradictory stereotypes of South Asian females as either exotic and seductive, dirty and repulsive, or sexually licentious (Brah, “Women” 48). The narrator alludes to being treated as an ornamental “trinket” (10) in later life by “middle-class white boys” (9). These small incidents of epistemic violence cause damage to the self and provide the rationale for physical violence.

Imperial claims to advanced humanity depended on a “narcissistic illusion” whereby negative attributes were evacuated from domestic

spaces and projected onto Black bodies (Pajaczkowska and Young 204). This miseducation resulted in distorted images about the Indian other which were fundamentally modified after the shock of the “Mutiny” in 1857 (Bandyopadhyay 73). Many British-Asians adopt an exaggerated public presentation to deconstruct negative beliefs and pragmatically ignore everyday insults and prejudices. Daljit assumes the “duty” (25) of re-educating English people even as she exaggerates her behaviour to prove civilisational worth. The presence of her raced body on domestic soil challenges conceptions of the impenetrable nation. Her ability to “speak English without an accent” (25) indicates that she is Anglicised and disrupts the meanings ascribed to both Indian and English characters. Ironically, the working-class villagers fail to speak standardised English when they communicate in a Midlands dialect and accent.

The White inhabitants of Tollington benefit from the security of belonging to a dominant faction and never experience the terror of hyper-visible embodiment (Rasmussen et al. 12). Radhika Mohanram argues that the Black body is discursively assembled “when the body is perceived as being out of place” (xii). British nationalists perceive Blackness as an incongruous deviation and aim to purge the nation of all corruptions. Paradoxically, the ideal of the White nation exists because Blackness has been brought into existence (Mohanram xiv). The British-Asian characters also uphold generalisations about the English such as “they treat their dogs like children” and “they don’t like bathing” (33), displaying

resentment from their colonial experiences. Racially-motivated assaults on Black Britons are spatial expressions of power that attempt to fix the demographic meaning of places (Back 19). Sam tries to assert ownership over Tollington when he states, “this is our patch” (193), even as the need to make this declaration reveals that the “patch” is not authoritatively possessed. It is precisely the insecurity of frontiers which inspires nationalist attacks. Locations are inhabited by living beings who generate changes and Sam can no longer derive comfort from the fantasy that territory guarantees racial purity (Baucom 4-5).

There is often discomfort about the magnitude of migration and efforts to achieve “*spatial management*” (Hage 38). Fears about a monsoonal deluge rest upon perceptions of licentious Black reproduction and population imbalances. Daljit recognises the provincialism in Tollington when she observes, “they have to mark out their territory” (33). Tollington identities interact with British identities and lead to a “nationalism of the neighbourhood” (Cohen, “Perversions” 33). Personal identifications are usually based on localised, intimate affiliations which are then filtered through grand-scale identities such as nation. In fact, the nation is often reduced to local emblems of street and home, as envisaged in Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968 (Webster, *Imagining Home* 184-85).<sup>5</sup> Meena notices that Tollington is distinct from England as a classed

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<sup>5</sup> Enoch Powell was the Conservative British politician who made a notorious speech in Birmingham which condemned immigration from the Commonwealth and defended a White form of Englishness against an alleged Black invasion.

landscape where people “ask for nothing and expect less” (67). Non-White people are seen as strangers and received with “stares and whispers” (25), whereas personal contact paints a more intricate mosaic of relationships and is precisely the type of dialogue that occurs in contact zones.

Direct engagement humanises others and challenges abstract generalisations. The villagers’ regard Daljit as “unthreatening” and with “deferential respect” (28), disclosing an ambivalence of desire and aversion, the ultimate paradox of colonial relations. While the Kumars subvert stereotypes of impoverished and uncivilised Indians, they cannot dismantle the entire edifice of preconceived ideas and are merely divorced from “bad” Asians in a binary that enables the retention of race-thinking (Rattansi, “On Being” 131). The co-existence of respect and contempt illustrates the many nuanced reactions to Black Britons and the contradictory impulses to expel difference and to assimilate this difference into a national community and make it useful to the nation-state.

Social stratification in a post-war landscape contributes to the eruption of racist violence in Tollington. Race is performatively exercised in that ritualised speech acts and norms pre-exist and exceed individual articulations (Butler, *Bodies* 234). Imperialism was not relinquished with the loss of imperial possessions, and the racial denigration of colonial subjects is blended with nationalism to create “ethnonationalism” in Tollington (Connor 68). Ethnonationalism is clearly shaped by imperial racism although assumes its own manifestations in the former metropole.

Rather than blaming institutional failures for his lack of opportunities, Sam enlists a nationalist colonial mentality and reiterates the commonly voiced accusation that visible others appropriate British entitlements. This discourse obscures the colonial misappropriation of Indian assets which continues to produce profits in the international division of labour.

Sam perceives a correlation between Black residents and the social change taking place in Tollington, believing that “British” signifies Whiteness. The new welfare state fails to intervene in the structures of resource distribution and confines the majority of the township to impoverished lives. Sam’s inability to “move on” (314) is also related to post-imperial melancholia in which the British political body and its citizens are unable to resume a healthy functioning directed towards the future as brutalities perpetuated on the colonial stage have not been addressed (Gunew, *Haunted Nations* 129). Civil life is thus pathologically structured by a locus of absence, the unacknowledged colonial history, which is expressed as racial hatred.

The rejection of Black Britons is linked to denials that imperialism is central to the British self, and, paradoxically, nostalgia for a particular imperial version of the nation (Burton 228). These individuals confront the British populace with the harsh realities of a colonial past and are a reminder that colonial exploits commandeered people as well as territory. Nostalgia for past versions of the nation signifies longing for a period which represented a golden age for Britain at the expense of colonies.

Nevertheless, history is shared by the colonisers and the colonised and results in symbiosis even before post-imperial migration. In the novel, an anachronistic textbook map is a nostalgic emblem of the lost Empire and falsely implies that Britain still dominates the world with “an expanse of pink” (211). Imperial history is sanitised to justify this longing for a return to the past, stressing the necessity of forgetting for remembrance and the simultaneous “affirmation and denial” of Empire (Baucom 7). These contradictory sentiments emphasise that invading other lands can be both desirable and threatening.

Sam’s behaviour functions within a wider structure of cultural racism. His attack on a British-Asian man declares the limits of belonging and attempts to restore the classification order that is contravened by Black bodies in national space (Douglas 35-36). It is significant that the assaulted man is a bank manager as the economic success of racialised groups traditionally arouses hostility in times of hardship. The bank manager is associated with middle-class values and class antipathies converge with antipathies towards Asians. Sam’s contempt for “wogs’ handout[s]” (193) illustrates an ideology of non-White people as parasites exploiting a host society. His struggle to exercise control disguises his marginality and lack of authority in determining entry to the nation. He clings to his sole relation to power only to find that his racial status is valueless in the economic market. Sam inflicts “blame and responsibility” (227) on non-Whites, constructing them as extrinsic to the nation and the



human species and deducing that these unworthy citizens should be deprived of the fruits of belonging. Meena confuses this regime of belonging by identifying with a Tollington mode of Englishness at the same time as distinguishing her family from “the English” (25).

*Anita and Me* examines the interaction between self and society in a classed, gendered, and raced landscape. While Meena does not suffer from any enduring crisis of belonging, external factors cause her to question her place in British society and her Indian identity. Her gradual development of a politicised consciousness gives her the courage to eventually abandon a colonised worldview, simultaneously achieving a sense of belonging and recognising her difference within Tollington. Moreover, belonging and dislocation “usually coexist” (Paranjape 233). The end of the text suggests that Meena has not achieved a permanent solution to the tensions of her British-Asian identity. Instead, she is equipped with strategic tools and the confidence to navigate her life-trajectory. Her social mobility and ability to claim “each resting place as home” (303) are related to her privileged class assets. However, the gendering and racialising of territory restricts her capacity for movement. The novel conveys that belonging constantly shifts in perpetual negotiations between the heroine and her social world.

## Chapter II

### The Fugitive Self: Memory, History, and Catastrophe

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The geographical partitioning of India is an enduring legacy of British colonialism and the novelistic flow of *Anita and Me* is disrupted when depicting this historical reality. Partition was a chaotic and prolonged process which continues to unfold. Shyam's social gatherings or *mehfils* invoke "pre-Partition Punjab" (Kabir, "Musical Recall" 186) by disregarding differences and uniting in familiar rituals. The festivities are an opportunity to cultivate diasporic memory and reiterate cultural practices such as "Urdu *ghazals* and Punjabi folk songs" (71).<sup>6</sup> This shared cultural capital allows the British-Asian characters to communicate fluently through certain cues, like the song which elicits a "ripple of recognition" (111). Such instinctive understanding of behaviour through sharing a life-world is a pivotal ingredient in belonging (Ignatieff 10).

When the atmosphere of a *mehfil* turns to sombre recollections, memories are activated by the "affective power" and "therapeutic possibilities" of music (Kabir, "Musical Recall" 175). Music inspires an emotional and sensory recall of occurrences which cannot be translated into language. The notes sung by Shyam, "something between a sob and a sigh," transport each individual across continents and time to "far, far away" (72). Meena is awakened physically and metaphorically at the same time as the adults' memories are stirring. Her descent from her bedroom

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<sup>6</sup> A *ghazal* is a "romantic lyric sung in Urdu" (Kabir, "Musical Recall" 175).

along a “darkened landing” (73) and down a staircase symbolises her voyage into the miasmic realm of memory beneath exterior facades. The layered story-telling of adult and child comprise “a double vision” (Davis 141) of an identity which is still being engineered. Meena resorts to scavenging for information and listening to “whispers” (86) to piece together the undercurrents of her parents’ lives. Their “secret” (86) histories are the missing segments which unite the past and present, the events preceding her birth which shape her life. Her own history is partially “belated” and “evacuated” (Hirsch 659) by the overwhelming intensity of her lineage.

A recurring narrative theme is the nebulous distinction between truth and fabrication. Meena initially feels “deprived of history” (10) due to her exclusion from Indian and British histories. Her proclivity for telling lies is linked to her imaginative creations of “mythology” (10), which supplements the void of her parents’ pasts and destabilises dominant accounts of the British nation. Similarly, the novel itself is the author’s mythology of personal experiences. The text is integrally structured by the tides of memory as it is based on an adult self reflecting on her childhood and remembering other peoples’ memories, further complicated by the fictionalisation of the author’s memories. Such multiple mediations mean that the recollections are detached from actual experiences, yet all memories are disconnected from an objective rendering of reality.

Moreover, memories are altered by the present occasion of remembering and all that has occurred after the recalled event (King 4).

Diasporas produce a unique intermingling of past and present. There is a tension between the migratory treks of the Kumar parents and their British-born daughter who inherits bonds to another country which she has never directly known. The opening line of the novel establishes the theme of deficient memories with the claim, "I do not have many memories of my very early childhood" (9). The "obvious" (9) memories are the tropes of destitute Indian migrants living in a boarding house and "suffering from culture shock" (9). Such stereotypes are perpetuated by the dominant White society and, as the narrator suggests, by British-Asians themselves in strategic manoeuvres. Populations in the so-called Third World are frequently cast outside the contemporary time of humanity in "anachronistic space" (McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 30). The narrator plays upon expectations of the primitive migrant who is unacquainted with modernity and the technology of television and radio. The preface introduces the notion of plural histories and the construction of stories which mitigate a perceived severance from overseas heritage. Meena's invented memories illustrate the fragility of all memories, which are reconfigured by complex cognitive processes and external influences as "the lived dimension of historical time" (Radstone and Hodgkin 20).

Black Britons were politically and socially vilified in the 1960s, their presence seeming to endanger a unique White British self. The denial of a

national home was mirrored by a discriminatory housing market. Syal's novel denounces the ubiquitous rental signs which proclaimed "No Irish, Blacks or Dogs" (165), equating particular people with animals and thus barring them from the domestic spaces of humanity. Such signs highlight that the Irish were also racialised and seen as being insufficiently White. Employment was similarly exploitative and prejudicial, with access to work frequently obstructed when "they see your face and suddenly the job is gone" (165). Public institutions tended to regard non-White citizens as foreigners who ought to be grateful for the advantages of "civilisation." After Meena is born, her mother is left "alone in a room with a dirty blanket for ten hours" and told that "Asian ladies have a very low pain threshold" (132). The national political arena was also alienating, especially with the anti-immigration policies of Enoch Powell who is condemned as "that Powell bastard with his bloody rivers" (267).

Successive British governments have criminalised explicit racism alongside introducing oppressive immigration legislation. However, it is impossible to prosecute systemic or subtle instances of discrimination, which have arguably become the paramount forms of prejudice. Extremist anti-immigration politics are generally unpopular although are covertly adopted by respectable politicians. Restrictive laws create fears about eviction from Britain and Meena expresses such insecurity when wondering whether her family might have to "escape back to India at short notice" (267). Since the 1981 British Nationality Act, citizenship is

governed by a “law of blood” that requires proof of a protracted biological lineage in the British Isles (Kumar, *Making* 24).

The education system is a social microcosm which dispenses alienating knowledge for Meena and informal education tends to be more valuable for her *Bildung* (Ozvalda 195, 203). Racial prejudices are prominent in her schooling due to the persistence of colonial myths in wider society. This systemic racism manifests in the content of the curriculum and in the attitudes of teachers and other students. The British control of colonial history is evident when school textbooks depict India as a subjugated terrain and its civilians as either “servile,” “unruly mobs,” or starving “hollow-eyed skeletons” (211). These distorted images masquerade as disinterested knowledge and displace scandal from the colonisers to the colonised (Dirks 297).

The history teacher initiates her pupils into the symbolic order of the nation by teaching a version of history that is reliant on the othering of India. It is an alienating lesson and Meena cannot possibly feel pride in a history which degrades her relatives and herself. When another student makes a remark about “darkies” (22), she conceals her humiliation with laughter but furtively kicks him under the desk. The teacher fails to reprimand the student for offensive conduct while Meena is “publicly beaten” (22) for defending herself. The public nature of this punishment reiterates the humiliating disciplinary procedures of Indian colonisation and demonstrates that there is no “benevolent gaze” (211). In addition,

Asian girls who refuse to be passive are often punished for violating common-sense knowledge (Brah and Minhas 20).

Shyam and Daljit migrate by circumstance and force after they are displaced within partitioned India. Nevertheless, they do not seem to have ever idealised Britain as a motherland of “promised gold” (31). With post-war migration from former colonies, initial decisions about where to settle were primarily influenced by employment or other opportunities (Bhatti 5). The infamous “Colour Bar” of discrimination exacerbated ghettoisation and determined places of residency in many cases. In the novel, Shyam makes a solitary migration to Britain before being joined by Daljit, and represents one of the few post-war migrants without pre-established contacts. He is instantly drawn to another migrant, Uncle Amman, when they first meet at the Paddington train station after arriving in England. They are pulled together by similar diasporic journeys and their mutual isolation in a foreign environment.

The phenomenon of “chain migration” occurs when settlement in one location provides the foundation for further migration and settlement (Westwood and Phizacklea 113). This pattern of movement results in regional clusters of migrants from the same ethnic groups or geographical territories, such as Indian Punjabis in Birmingham and Bangladeshis and Pakistanis in Bradford. Travelling to a distant country is fraught with risk but the existence of some kind of relationship network or advance knowledge can ensure a degree of security. The depiction of the Kumar

family as the only Indians living in Tollington is an improbable portrait of South Asian settlement patterns. Their seclusion enables a heightened sense of their marginality and pioneering role for future settlers. In fact, the *dénouement* unveils the mysterious occupants of the “Big House” and disproves that the Kumars are “the only local colour” (318). Before this revelation, the family seeks camaraderie from a network of British-Asian friends who form an “artificial *bridari*” or generalised kinship group (Hussain 102). The friendship network performs the function of the absent extended family remaining in India. Shyam displays “long silences and intense looks” (80) when agonising about this absence, demonstrating that the *bridari* is composed of stand-in relatives and not replacements.

One aspect of diaspora is a collective consciousness of similar migratory pasts and ethnic group boundaries. The British-Asians in Syal’s text are united by their Punjabi identities and an ambivalent, sometimes inhospitable, British environment. Their similarity is reinforced when their White neighbours fail to grasp their “complex rules of hospitality” (113) and when Shyam regards an unknown British-Punjabi man as “a brother” (323). Belonging to a diasporic group does not automatically confer cohesiveness and there are power imbalances and exclusions within diasporas (Bromley 8; Anthias, “Evaluating” 564). The characters defy any conception of unified “communities” although are depicted as having a broadly-based solidarity. This closeness is necessary at a time when British-Asians endured a high degree of hostility and were a conspicuous



minority; a closeness which is relative to the British context as there is no guarantee that the same people would befriend each other on the subcontinent. The Kumars' *bridari* provides a space for sharing experiences and confirms that they are not alone in "living out this unfolding adventure" (31). The idea of "communality" refers to an affective bonding and is more accurate than the uncomplicated harmony implied by the notion of "community."

The Kumars' diasporic identities are sustained through collective memories which flow together to form a "*confluence of narratives*" (Brah, *Cartographies* 183). The past is usually summoned to serve the needs of the present and present circumstances affect what is remembered and how it is remembered. Memories are always belated and it is impossible to retrieve exact impressions of what actually occurred. While memories derive from the time before migration and are fixed upon this time, places are often incompatible with "imaginary homelands" (Rushdie, "Imaginary" 10). Indeed, the areas which the Kumars commemorate are incorporated into Pakistan after Partition. When the "symbolic spatial structure of India" is constantly deployed, a breach is created between place and representation so that the signification becomes the real (Ghosh 76-77). Attachments to material place remain powerful and regional micro-locations are often more cherished and resonant than the macro nation-state. Village identities are also encouraged by the agrarian economy of the Punjab and the Kumars' Punjabi birthplaces take

precedence over the idea of India. Even so, the British homogenisation of Indians makes them representatives of an entire country and, conversely, their residence in Britain renders them into Anglicised expatriates in India (Paranjape 238). Their Indian origins only exist in their imaginations after being fetishised and altered by memories.

The two primary aesthetics of memory in *Anita and Me* are a mode of mourning and a mode of nostalgia. Memories interact with historical events and places to result in a layered memory-history product. Daljit's nostalgic recollections of pre-Partition Punjab are contrasted with traumatic memories of Partition. The Kumars were forced to move to Delhi after the redrawing of Indian borders and eruption of aggression, forging diasporic identities prior to even leaving the subcontinent. Their first migration was a survival strategy to avoid "annihilating violence" (Das, "Composition" 65) and it is the forced nature of this relocation which adds extra weight to their Punjabi nostalgia. The meaning of nostalgia is "a return home" and "pain," implying that longing for home is pathologised as injury (Gunew, "Home of Language" 47).

Daljit's depressive moods descend after prolonged separation from a mother who is a fundamental link to her past motherland. Extended family networks are especially important sources of domestic and emotional support for Indian women (Ganguly 42). Daljit endures the doubled gendered responsibilities of domestic duties and employment in the paid labour market. She struggles to cope with these demands after

Meena's brother, Sunil, is born and laments, "back home I would have sisters, mothers, servants ..." (196). She almost unconsciously normalises the servitude of others at "home" and underscores her demoted class status in Britain. Diasporic nostalgia can operate as disguised dissatisfaction with the present place of settlement which, if acknowledged, might make the decision to migrate seem futile (Ganguly 44). Nostalgia thus replaces a flawed present with an idyllic past.

Colonial Punjab is a spectral manifestation in the text, first disrupting and then merging with the present time when it is envisaged in memories. The Punjab was a sovereign state until it was annexed by the British Empire after the Anglo-Sikh War of 1848-49. The most important tenets in asserting Punjabi membership are speaking the language and claiming ancestral ties to the region (Helweg 362). Meena's limited linguistic fluency therefore restricts her cultural identifications. Local identities are central to a broader sense of Punjabi status, as illustrated by Daljit's "mantra about her ancestral home" (34) in an agrarian village near Chandigarh. Her emotional connections are to tangible places and the biological foundations of her ancestors (Chakrabarty, "Remembered Villages" 324).<sup>7</sup> Daljit's recollections are often triggered by the mnemonic apparatus of food preparation, which serves as an "embodied experience" and "sensory map" (Herbert 136). Meals are "seasoned with memory and

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<sup>7</sup> On a practical level, land and ancestry were coupled together by the colonial practice of recording property ownership and kinship structures in Punjabi villages (Gilmartin 10).

longing,” and bring Daljit and Shyam closer to “their far-away mothers” (61). Food nourishes their souls and provides emotional energy to sustain diasporic life. True to its meaning, nostalgia is a route for returning home through the detours of the imagination.

Nostalgia romanticises past places and can signify a desire for how an individual wanted things to be more than how they actually were (Ganguly 40). Daljit’s Punjabi village appears as exotic memory fragments with images of a cobra, peacocks, and monsoonal rain. These memories are relayed to her daughter and to readers of the novel in an ironic exaggeration and redeployment of exotic discourses (Huggan ix-x). Her remoteness from what she describes also exoticises the familiar. Absence and distance necessarily involve an estrangement between the moment and the memory. The emotional dimension of nostalgia and the passage of time are other factors which interfere with the substance of memories. Daljit’s “litany of love” (35) expands the brightness of pre-Partition Punjab and minimises negative characteristics. The original can never be recaptured and this permanent loss is responsible for her obsessive repetition of nostalgic memories. Memory can only re-present and modify pieces of the past in the attempt to make them present in another time.

*Anita and Me* confronts the prevailing “regimes of memory” (Radstone and Hodgkin 10) about the territorial division of India on 14-15 August, 1947. Partition was a time of unprecedented conditions and extreme behaviour ranging from excessive cruelty to deeds of tremendous compassion. At least twelve million people were displaced and the ensuing chaos led to an estimated one million deaths. Daljit and Shyam ironically owe their marriage to this displacement after meeting in Delhi following separate exoduses from the Punjab. One of the most serious long-term injuries was the damage done to a sense of self and place in the social structure, making “the self radically fugitive and the world radically fragmented” (Das, “Composition” 65). The extraordinary nature of Partition makes it impossible to reconcile with the rhythms of ordinary life, and, for the characters, it seems to exist in a separate dimension as “a time apart” (Kamra 193). In reality, it operates on a continuum in which reliving memories in other temporalities dislodges the fixing of events in history (Radstone and Hodgkin 15). The novel reveals how Partition deeply marked the future cycles of many lives.

The Indian nation-state has neglected the trauma of Partition in favour of masculinist politics which celebrate independence from Britain. For survivors, violence is an essential meaning of Partition rather than an aberration from the event (Pandey 52). There are no public monuments to bear witness to Partition, nor have there been any court cases, reconciliation tribunals, or public spaces allocated for individuals to

articulate their experiences (Das, *Critical Events* 192). In conservative histories, the carnage caused by the partitioning of people is suppressed, externalised to blame the other, or formulated in terms of heroic sacrifice. In Britain, the violence was characterised as the unleashing of innate Eastern savagery after the removal of orderly British rule (Webster, *Englishness* 61). However, the dynamics of Partition are mirrored in the racist attacks perpetuated within Britain inside and outside the text. These attacks – and colonial history itself – contest media claims that acts of savagery are “beyond anything known to the Western world.”<sup>8</sup>

The Kumars’ tremors of loss vibrate just below the surface of daily life, and Meena’s education about these subterranean vibrations is gained secondhand and “inadvertently” (71) from listening to adult conversations. Her parents refrain from disclosing their memories in an effort to shield her from traumatic knowledge and possibly because they cannot find words to express inner turmoil. Their reticence could also be caused by an emotional detachment from English and the inadequacies of the colonising language for verbalising private pain. Partition is epitomised by the uncertainty of boundaries, of “some people not knowing until the day the borders were announced, whether they would have to move hundreds of miles away” (71). It was prefaced by years of

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<sup>8</sup> This comment was made in a newspaper article published in *British Paramount News* on 11 September, 1947, and entitled “Million Flee Punjab Riots” (Webster, *Englishness* 61).

hardening polarisation and episodes of inter-religious violence such as those portrayed in the text.

Heterosexual gender relations are central to Partition and the conventional focus on the economic and political public sphere participates in a gendered “conspiracy of silence” (Raman 260; Kaul 10). Women and girls were subjected to humiliation, mutilation, rape, abduction, and murder. At least seventy-five thousand females were raped or abducted, and Syal’s novel alludes to the personal histories underlying this painful statistic. Women are especially targeted in any period of chaos due to their roles as vessels of culture and the next generation, both of which are contaminated through the act of rape. The female body is often viewed as symbolising the social body of a group and is used to mark the centres and boundaries of nations (Gedalof 94). Thus, Partition assaults on females were attacks on an entire group and their *izzat* or honour, their bodies reduced to mere receptacles for competing meanings about sexuality and a “violent dialogue between men” (Das, *Critical Events* 186). Dichotomies of victim and perpetrator were disrupted by incidents of relatives either murdering women in their own families or coercing them to commit suicide (Kaul 5). These acts of kinship betrayal are particularly concealed in Indian and family histories.

The gendered violence of Partition is portrayed by the characters of Shaila and Mumtaz. However, it is only insinuated with euphemisms such as Mumtaz’s declaration that “they wanted to do such things to us” (73).

Despite the Punjabi comradeship displayed in the novel, the remembering indicates that rhetorical barriers between “them” and “us” maintain a pervasive grip on the mind. Mumtaz is a Muslim and her testimony is countered by the avowal that “what was happening to you was also happening to us” (73). Shaila’s allusion to the abduction and rape of her sister Sumi is filled with ellipses and silences, mirroring the silences in Indian historiography and public discourse. The forcefulness of “national honour” is demonstrated by the endeavours of India and Pakistan to recover abducted women with the Inter-Dominion Agreement signed on 3 September 1947, followed by the Indian Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act of 1949 (Das, *Critical Events* 7-8, 66). All abducted females were treated as property of the patriarchal state and indistinguishable victims who required rescuing, even though some had started new lives or chosen to leave their families. Females were therefore divested of self-determination as implements of nation-building and state “disciplinary power” (Das, *Critical Events* 67).

Shaila’s testimony is disjointed by the supposedly shameful nature of its content and the predicament of structuring traumatic events into words. Trauma is cognitively processed as sensory impressions and must somehow be decoded and translated into narrative (van der Kolk 287). It is difficult to speak about sexual violence without citing binary discourses of purity and defilement, so vacillation and silence can be ways of resisting missions to restore women to patriarchal institutions (Didur 11). There are



situations where compelling speech is intrusive. In Shaila's account, what remains unsaid is of greater significance than what is voiced. She is haunted by her mother's warning, "don't look ... don't look" (74), and believes that the trivial act of looking provoked the "mad men" (74) to take Sumi. She is forced to absorb later knowledge of Partition into her memory and cannot return to a time of hope when she did not know what happened to her sister. Her tormented questioning, "where is she? *Hai mere dil ... where is she now?*" (74), highlights the anguish of simultaneously not-knowing and knowing.

The dissection of the subcontinent artificially superimposed nation-states over formerly interdependent groups and made religion the decisive and divisive principle of nationality. A "cognitive map with mental borders" (Sinha-Kerkhoff and Bal 75) needed to be propagated to justify the redrawn geographical map. Partition encouraged the invention of new imagined communities based on an inability to co-exist, and was more about ethnic mobilisation of religious groups than specific practices or beliefs (Ballard, "Panth" 24). Prior to this mobilisation, regional and cultural identities often took precedence over religious identities in the Punjab.<sup>9</sup> Commonality is affirmed in Syal's text with the statement that "the land they shared was more important than the religious differences" (35). Nevertheless, hierarchies such as caste and class prevented a utopia

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, a unique sense of Bengali identity led to separatist conflict in East Pakistan, which became the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971.

of syncretic harmony and British colonialism had distorted relationships and identities before it distorted Indian geography.

Colonial intervention is mourned when one character blames the “gores” (73) for Partition. Britain was certainly culpable for the upheaval but many interest groups demanded territorial entitlements as the price of independence. From the late nineteenth century, “ethno-religious polarisation” responded to colonisation and Christian missionaries, and reform movements increasingly invented new “orthodoxies” to conceal overlapping practices between the three major traditions of Sikhism, Islam, and Hinduism (Ballard, “Panth” 8, 27). Religion was foregrounded by the British categorisation of Indians into religious groups. The Kumars defy religious segregation as Daljit is from a Sikh family and Shyam from a communist Hindu family. The fanaticism of Partition repels them from institutionalised religion and their friends are treated as fellow Punjabis regardless of belief systems, although having “few Muslim friends” (73) suggests the schisms underlying Punjabi unity.

Partition afflicted the entire social structure of northern India and created an irrevocable disparity between cartography and identity. The cleavage of the Punjab was experienced as “cultural trauma” for negating a shared history and group consciousness (Smelser 38, 44). The characters in the novel engage in behaviour which is necessarily contradictory, sustaining relationships and traditions at *mehfils* at the same time as commemorating the trauma as an indelible part of their cultural memory.

Population movements now mean that many people who speak Punjabi reside outside the territory and many who live within the region are unfamiliar with the language (Grewal 51). Aside from the two Punjabs in Pakistan and India, the Punjabi diaspora reconstructs place and culture in spaces exterior to physical landscape (Singh and Singh Thandi 341).<sup>10</sup> This third Punjab of the mind is actively worked upon and crafted in *Anita and Me*. However, it is impossible to recapture any perceived syncretism from the re-membered Punjab. If this place ever existed, it is now extinguished, and the diasporic present is made more bearable by the utopian myth of return (Safran 94). Punjabi specificity is erased in 1960s Britain when all Indians are predominantly disparaged as “Pakis,” as exhibited by Deirdre Rutter’s indifferent assumption that Daljit is from Pakistan. In many ways, living in diasporic space makes the Kumars more self-consciously Punjabi and induces them to exaggerate these identities.

Meena indirectly absorbs colonial dispossession and the routes of migration through her parents’ pasts. Trauma refers to a wound which penetrates the skin and causes an inflammatory response in the entire body (Leys 19). In Meena’s case, Partition trauma overflows from the bodies of others and into her own body. She acquires “postmemory” from indirectly experiencing colonialism and Partition, and has profound

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<sup>10</sup> J.S. Grewal observes that Partition divided the Punjab into more than just two territorial and administrative regions. In 1966, a direct outcome of the first division was the further separation of Indian Punjab into the states of Haryana, the Union Territory of Chandigarh, and parts of Himachal Pradesh, due to linguistic differences (Grewal 52).

material connections with the remembered places (Hirsch 661-62). These places only exist in memories as they are transformed by subjectivity and historical forces. The condition of absence is evoked more than the Punjab itself and Meena internalises this loss. Like grand-narrative history, personal history radiates repercussions for future generations and transmits experience to others. The trauma of Partition is thus transferred between the Kumars, a dispersal that prevents the perishing of memories with the deaths of immediate survivors (Gilroy, "Diaspora" 340).

Meena is exposed to selective "incarnations from other lives" (36) when her parents' memories are measured out in increments. The immense silence of her parental past contributes to her initial amplified sense of Englishness and preference for England over India. To Meena, Daljit's description of witnessing a rickshaw driver stab a stranger to death is a dramatic story detached from reality. She fails to understand the meaning of this event as it is dislocated from the wider historical context and conveyed in the form of an anecdote. For Daljit, however, it is an upsetting memory of a cruel and pointless murder. Regardless of her refusal to "repeat it more than twice" (36), it has most likely been replaying constantly in her mind. Shyam has a similar account of "ruffians and rogues" (76) in which he was unintentionally implicated in planting a bomb in Lahore. The victim was "well respected" before a Partition mentality stripped him of humanity and reduced him to the solitary

symbol of “Muslim” (76). This mentality legitimised hatred by negating subjectivity and converting people into “*things*” (Das and Nandy 180-82).

Shyam’s rare disclosure about Lahore is “a gift” (76) to his daughter and a means of bonding, albeit contravening his protective instincts.

Meena sees it as a tale of adventure to rival the war record of Anita’s father after lamenting that her father was a non-participant in this glorified past of military triumph. Her desire to have a personal war story reveals an aspiration to be sutured to the existing national narrative.

Shyam’s confession that Indians had “different battles” (70) is a source of pride and finally makes her aware of the reasons for her sense of unbelonging. His need to divulge stems from the living texture of his memories which have affected the person he has become. He is also motivated to preserve a sense of ethnicity by enriching his daughter’s ties to “home,” despite the inevitable editing and revision of his recollections. Such “cultural memory” aims to maintain ethnic identity even as this ethnicity is recreated in Britain (Burrell and Panayi 16).

Shyam and Daljit’s photographs are material links to their pasts and are “the medium connecting memory and postmemory” (Hirsch 669). Meena reads narratives in these images to supplement the many gaps in her knowledge. Daljit’s photographs are “hoarded in a shiny suitcase” (35), a travel object filled with the images through which she travels across the perimeters of time. Meena is both interested in her parents’ histories and resentful at being “excluded” (36). She feels embittered about being

denied an exciting life in India and is unable to appreciate that her parents moved to Britain to protect her future from the fall-out of colonialism. She projects “excitement” (37) and “the epic” (36) onto abstract details because they are so outside her frame of reference. The lives of others are always examined at a remove and infused with unreality and drama by appearing in anecdotal form. In contrast, Daljit’s direct experience with milking goats is a banal routine and witnessing a murder is terrifying. This variation in perspectives illuminates the claim that exoticism is a matter of “aesthetic perception” (Huggan 13) rather than an inherent property.

On the night of one of her parents’ *mehfils*, Meena accidentally overhears the mourning songs which transform the adults into “strangers” (72). She learns that her own parents have hidden depths and is forced to reassess their pasts as having “a deceptively still surface and a deadly undercurrent” (75). She later relives Partition memories in troubled dreams of “blood red trains,” “severed limbs,” “beautiful sisters in churning rivers,” and “old men’s heads in flowerbeds” (75). The context of a *mehfil* sanctions the reopening of “old wounds” (73) which are temporarily sutured to facilitate the daily demands of living and then unsutured at these gatherings. The known is made strange when Meena hears “familiar voices saying such terrible and alien things” (73). She is an outsider when listening to the memorialisation of suffering through “the gap” (73) in a door. It is through this opening that she perceives another world, seemingly remote from but deeply bound to Britain.

The entire room is personified as “sighing” (74) from tormented stories of being marched through streets, the decapitation of a father, and trains arriving “full of dead families” (73). Shyam describes the decapitation of a Muslim man when his train to Delhi is attacked by “Hindu *goondas*” (75). Such occurrences were frequent in this time of social vacuum when the ordinary rules of civility were upturned. Some individuals clung to any advantages which could save their lives, like the Sikh man who cuts his hair or Shyam’s communist father quoting the *Bhagavad Gita* to their attackers. The difference between life and death was therefore determined by outward signs of belonging which could be strategically appropriated in moments of desperation. The “misery tales” (67) are told haltingly, are full of gaps, and remain incomprehensible even to the story-tellers. There is often a fundamental split between the self who has endured trauma and the self who goes on living afterwards (King 19). Trauma instigates a severance from normality which cannot be easily assimilated to rational explanation or integrated in a life-story (Jain, “Writing” 320). The British-Asian characters are consumed by memories and sharing them can only be a temporary exorcism.

In the novel, the broken quality of the recounted memories is a common quality of trauma. One strand of thought claims that trauma is unrepresentable and language inadequate for capturing internal wounds. Language cannot transmit any experience intact and there is just a greater distinction between trauma and linguistic signs. It is unclear whether the

recollections are spoken in Punjabi and add to the incoherence of the stories due to Meena's lack of fluency. She also has difficulty deciphering the voices as she is listening from a "distance" (73). This is more than an immediate spatial barrier as it includes a distance between past and present; here and there; speaking and listening; memory and postmemory. The fragmented descriptions approximate the disparities between traumatic experiences and the limitations of words, avoiding the closure and absolute knowledge demanded by rationalist history (Didur 136-37). Partition remains inexplicable and unknowable even as the characters seek to make sense of what happened and render it meaningful.

Partition memories are primarily communicated and lamented at social congregations, where individual recollections merge with other accounts to produce collective memories. Sharing private distress removes a sense of isolation and meaninglessness, reminds grievors that others have sustained similar adversity, and initiates a "moral community" of survivors (Saunders and Aghaie 21; Das, *Critical Events* 176). The shared history of Partition bonds the diasporic Punjabis together as they "all have these stories" (73). Ironically, regular activation of the stories fortifies the group around a mutual endurance of persecution and survival (Beniwal 109). Meena is initially excluded from this moral community and only asserts membership once she is able to comprehend her inherited legacies. The collective circulation of grief compensates for governmental forgetting and has elements of ritualisation or ceremony. The concept of "rememory"



highlights the variance between an experience and the memory of this experience, engaging in “conservation” and “transformation” (Radstone and Hodgkin 20). Every re-membering involves piecing together dismembered fragments and attuning them to whatever is crystallised in language (King 25). It seems that the Kumars cannot cease the repetition of their ordeals even though a degree of forgetting is essential to avoid “shipwreck” (74) and allow life to continue.

Remembering signifies the need to resist any superficial healing of wounds and the official forgetting of the past. Forgetting does not necessarily connote absolute erasure and in many cases encompasses the “unthought known” (King 20), that which is suppressed or outside of consciousness. The characters’ inability to forget is also the result of a lack of resolution and the failure of nation-states to accept accountability in suffering *en masse*. Their sorrow negates nationalist rhetoric about the necessity of violence for demarcating national frontiers and banishing non-citizens (Kaul 7). Their voicing of memories requires “memory-work,” an exhausting labour of remembering *and* forgetting. Sam Durrant argues that such “melancholic rituals” are political practices that move beyond private grieving in responding to historical atrocities (10-11). As a novel of development, historical change is paralleled with the evolution of the protagonist and the arduous re-membering of a disjointed past maintains a sense of moral outrage about present injustices. Preservation of trauma might be perceived as a respectful commemoration of the dead

and forgetting as a betrayal of those who died (LaCapra, *Writing History* 22). The text is a type of aesthetic memory-work in responding to the urge to document and temporarily expel memories.

*Anita and Me* is a literary “version of history” (165) from the perspective of Britain’s others. It disputes the very notion of objective truth and engages instead in “a dialogic exchange” which exposes history as the symbolic power to determine reality (LaCapra, *Writing History* 35; Bourdieu, “Symbolic Power” 79). History is kaleidoscopic and transmutes into new patterns with each minute rotation of perspective. Learning about the past is essential for Meena’s development and the reader is also encouraged to relearn the facts of history. As discussed in the final chapter, the arrival of her maternal grandmother partially severs her from Britain and an internalised gaze of deficiency. She covets her grandmother’s stories about life under imperial rule and, for the first time, has a real desire to visit India. Her previous beliefs were confused by the society she inhabits and her education within this society, leading to a breach from history and an inability to conjoin her life with other lives.

### Chapter III

## Homing and Estrangement, Married and Condemned to Britain

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The postcolonial condition is frequently affected by tensions between the “*heimlich*” and the “*unheimlich*” or the “homely” and the “unhomely.” The two states are intricately related and the unhomely occurs when repressed features of the homely emerge (Freud 245). Freud argues that the *heimlich* already contains ambivalence and concealed threat, and the *unheimlich* is “what arouses dread and horror” (219) when the familiar becomes distortedly unfamiliar (224, 226). *Anita and Me* is dominated by expressions of the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* from the past colonisation of India and the Kumars’ present residence in England.

The insular enclave of Tollington is fractured when it is expanded to converge with the rest of England, contributing to a dislocation of homeliness and enunciations of post-imperial xenophobia. Meena is distressed to find that the unhomely already existed beneath a surface facade of geniality and her pursuit of home engages in a battle to determine the laws of belonging. An impression of home is an unreachable destination rather than origin and is profoundly linked to both familiarity and unfamiliarity (Fortier, “Making Home” 118). When the outside world is disordered, Meena increasingly connects with her relatives and rediscovers a sense of homeliness, albeit forever tainted by

unhomeliness. At the same time, the growing closeness of the Kumars is juxtaposed with the disintegration of the Rutter family.

Home encompasses a range of contradictions as “a mixture of reality and imagination, of memories and myths” (Kershen 112). Place is critical to identity and Meena wants to claim a “portion of the earth” (Naipaul 14) even as she develops connections to new places.

Environments have obvious effects on cultural practices, values, and personalities. The first place of attachment is often the most evocative as it is where an individual initially becomes self-aware in relation to a surrounding environment. This dyadic relationship of self and place is central to Meena’s cultivation of a sense of home, complicated by the trajectories of her pre-existence occurring in an imaginary field of memories and stories. There can only ever be representations of India and the label itself suppresses the vastness and heterogeneity of the described geography. Furthermore, an integrated nation-state did not exist until the English East India Company assembled the landmass into a whole (Mohanram 189; Bandyopadhyay 50).

Homes are often uninclusive and unwelcoming as sources “of safety and of terror” (Brah, *Cartographies* 180). Colonialism and nostalgia make imagined homes in India sites of pain and estrangement for Daljit and Shyam. Their connections to home and a perception of order are ruptured both by localised incidents of violence, and by the broader histories of British colonialism and partitioning of India. Colonial

occupation demonstrates that the founding of some homes causes the ravaging of others (Ahmed et al. 6). Similarly, Indian Partition initiated a violent destruction of homes and forced exiled individuals to subsist in refugee camps within their apparent homelands. Daljit and Shyam are alienated in post-independent India when they encounter poverty and the corruption of the new administration. Daljit confesses, "that's why we had to leave, we were poor and clever" (212). The transfer of power meant that Indians were now accountable for social inequalities of "eat – or get eaten up" (Adiga 64).

The Kumar parents are double migrants and their displacement in India influences them to make a second migration to England. Their sentiments about home comprise a mixture of hopes and hazards, moulded by the conditions of departure and their experiences upon arriving in England (Herbert 138). As a consequence, their Indian homeland does not pre-exist emigration and is manufactured in diasporic space (Axel, "Diasporic Imaginary" 425). The Kumars alter notions of India by creating a deterritorialised "travelling nation" (Dhaliwal, "Travelling" 2). They regard England with an ambivalence of "sacrifice and gain" (181), resenting imperial misdeeds and the perceived primitive manners of "the English" as well as appreciating opportunities for education and stability.

Shyam and Daljit preserve the "luggage" (267) of their pasts in suitcases of "old Indian suits, photographs and yellowing official papers"

(267). These remnants of home are revered objects of memory and expanded in meaning by diaspora. Religion is replaced with the “shrine” (267) of these memory-suitcases as portmanteaus for storing “memorialised biographical narratives” (Tolia-Kelly 151). Such material artefacts are intended to prevent forgetting, yet the flaws of the absent home are forgotten to alleviate the unhomely present. The Kumars’ house is compared to “another planet” (165) as it is so unlike the outside world in Tollington and the English media, mirroring Meena’s sense of division between internal identity and external appearance.

When Daljit envisages a resemblance between her Punjabi home and Tollington, the original reference-point is located in India and the Midlands village is the secondary duplicate or imitation. In this vision, she sees “fields and trees, light and space, and a horizon that welcomed the sky which, on a warm night and through squinted eyes, could almost look something like home” (35). Topographical markers of “fields and trees” naturalise her claim to be rooted in unique terrain. Her first home cannot be easily replicated and Tollington is only “almost” similar, signifying an unbreachable difference and distance. Homes can be remade but there is always an element of unsettlement as earlier places wrench hearts and minds and shape present perceptions. Conversely, diasporic individuals need to be cautious about commemorating biological roots in homelands because the same discourses are employed by British nationalists to declare “cultural supremacy and historical priority” (Bhabha 157).

The Kumars' migration to Britain instigates an overlap and merging of spheres when the marginal status of the periphery is destabilised and transported into the centre (Hand 13). Unequal power relations enable the metropolis to negate horizontal networks of exchange and define itself as the metropolis. The British-Asians disrupt normalised associations between race and place by enacting "a mobile cultural citizenship" (Alexander and Knowles 8; Tolia-Kelly 158). The vibrant drama of the subcontinent is contrasted with the "so shabby, so forgotten" (294) landscape of Tollington. The textual image of India is vivid even though the novel is entirely set in Britain, with linguistic fusion contributing to an erosion of boundaries. Punjabi words and expressions are dispersed throughout the text and collapse any assumed incompatibility with English. After all, the British Empire has converted English into an Indian language. While Meena's father speaks in a "characteristic blend of Punjabi and English" (74), the White Britons remain linguistically and geographically restricted and are predominantly opposed to change.

Relationships and acceptance within a group are important in creating homeliness. Meena can obtain security from this incorporation but is constrained by pressures to conform and the possibility of ejection: "membership involves obligations" (Song 41). Migration imposes a separation from extended family and therefore founding a home in England is problematic for the Kumars. Shyam and Daljit are anguished about the remoteness of their parents and alarmed that death will occur

with “everything left unsaid” (81). The parents left behind allow them to preserve ties to the subcontinent and are a motivation to return. Their alarm is heightened by events in Britain which elucidate the momentous mortality of their migration. The veneration of relatives is also exaggerated by their absence.

The Kumars reconfigure former networks of home into new patterns of loyalty, establishing a surrogate family of fellow Punjabi expatriates to alleviate the ache of separation. Meena has divergent views about this *bridari*, appreciating the caring guardianship she receives but resenting “communal policing” (31). The collective of “Aunties” emits “gentle malice” (33) in pressuring their adopted niece to behave in a feminine and obedient manner. Meena’s only introduction to the “anonymous army of blood relatives” (284) is via photographs and transmitted information. She wryly observes that such transmission is a poor substitute for direct contact, “as if committing them to memory would make up for not being with them” (30). This education is a pragmatic diasporic tactic of acquainting the second-generation with their scattered lineage.

Nationalist notions of home stipulate that an individual must be devoted to a single entity and imply a state of inertia rather than the constant movement involved in all identities. The gendering of home fixes females in an unchanging domestic enclosure and allows males to safely explore and conquer other prospective homes (Massey 166-67). Despite



the unfixed nature of home, colonisation leads to genuine experiences of upheaval and displacement. Shyam and Daljit still regard India as “home” (263), which causes consternation for their daughter whom has alternative attachments. Nevertheless, their mythical idea of home is a diasporic resource of survival and small incidents reinforce their gradual drifting away from India, such as Shyam’s deteriorating competence in reading Hindi. The Kumar parents never fully inhabit Tollington and their house is a sanctuary for avoiding the racial scrutiny of public display. It is open to the invasion of “visiting Indian families” (29) whereas a White neighbour is permitted to enter the domestic realm on only two occasions. Daljit and Shyam are courteous towards their neighbours at the same time as maintaining a civil remoteness. Such detachment is associated with both their class and their postcolonial difference.

Home-making is achieved by an interaction between emotions and particular places. While physical architecture does not necessarily guarantee safety, houses do bestow some kind of asylum and niche for British-Asians in an unaccommodating British homeland. Meena’s fluctuating identifications illustrate that her sense of home is integrally tied to self-identity, develops over time, and is ever-changing. Her “homing desire” (Brah, *Cartographies* 16) is never satiated and materialises in conjunction with the perceived possession of homes. She endures shifting disparities between the self, the domestic residence, the neighbourhood, and the nation, as she learns to balance the “tension

between private desire and public responsibility" (Nasta, *Home Truths* 192-93). Meena's sense of an English home is predicated on erroneous beliefs which require redefinition, as when the "travelling people" (102) at the village fair cause her to reflect on her own heritage of travel. Her belief that India is "the only home I had ever known" (112) is based on indirect experience and her socialisation in Tollington means that India will always be more alien than Britain. Focussing on a distant imaginary homeland can also be a symptom of wanting to belong in the country of residence (van der Veer, "Diasporic Imagination" 12).

A sinister house, labelled by Meena as the "Big House," features prominently as a spectre of colonisation and another dimension of the Tollington contact zone. She responds with ambivalence, concurrently fearing and having a strange affinity with this symbol of otherness. At the climax of the novel, its occupants are revealed to be a British-Punjabi man, Harinder Singh, and his French wife, Mireille. The property therefore embodies the widespread fear of Black Britons and the presumed tainting of Britishness from interracial contact. The terminology of "Big House" also alludes to the designation for the houses of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland. The exterior opulence of Anglo-Irish Big Houses masks the fragility of the British control of other lands (Kiberd 366-67). These sites of unhomeliness mark the tenuous barrier between populations and an inability to prevent the inevitable hybridisation of colonising forces and loss of a stable home, "forever English in Ireland, forever Irish in England" (Kiberd 367).

Unlike other houses in Tollington which blend into one another, the Big House is isolated and apparently devoid of a human presence. The property is deliberately segregated from the public realm with signs that caution against trespassing on the “island of private grounds” (13). The physically menacing estate is the site where a child drowned in the old mine-shaft, and Meena’s childish imagination visualises it as a threatening place occupied by supernatural beings. Indeed, according to colonial discourses about mixed-race, the current occupants of the house are “strange creatures” (319). Working-class women are particularly accused of depraved sexuality and contaminating bloodlines from liaisons with Black men, as typified by Edward Long’s comments in 1772 that such women “are remarkably fond of the blacks ... would connect themselves with horses and asses if the laws permitted them” (Alibhai-Brown 50-51). The location of the failed mine on the property associates the death of livelihoods with the death of a child.

The Big House is a painful emblem of a glorified past and an impoverished present, demonstrating that the ghostly relics of the past continue to intrude on present lives. It is a *lieux de mémoire*, a site of memory, and was assembled during the time of British Empire with the proceeds of colonial atrocity (Nora 7; van der Veer, “Enigma” 97). Harinder and Mireille transgress the social laws of a society which stigmatises so-called mixed race. British colonisers expressed desire for colonised others and exhibited profound anxiety about the degeneration

of Whiteness from racial contact. The “desiring machine” of colonialism simultaneously undermined racial boundaries and led to a more intensive policing of these boundaries (Young 98, 180). In another allusion, “Big House” is a colloquial term for a prison and infers that Harinder and Mireille are symbolically imprisoned by their miscegenation (Stein, *Black British Literature* 37). Their self-containment is a protective defence against accusations of sexual perversity and paradoxically makes the house a prison and a refuge from colonial history. Even so, the prospect of contamination is reduced as Mireille is a racially deficient French other. Britain remains protected from the invasion of a mixed otherness as Harinder has procured a British asset but has not acquired a British wife.

Anita imagines that a witch lives in the Big House and that “the witch is English” (101). The “witch” of colonialism is English, or, more accurately, British, but the inhabitants of the estate represent a new kind of post-imperial Britishness inside the national icon of a country manor. The dilapidated appearance of the house symbolises the faded grandeur of imperial power and the entwined histories of India and Britain, with “high mournful trees” (13) around its perimeters. It is also a type of colonial curio transplanted to the soil of the former imperial centre. Meena acts as a pseudo-colonial explorer in regarding the property as a foreboding wilderness which needs to be investigated and made known. Her fixation with the house implies that it is a fantasy object standing in for a traumatic past (Salecl 216). She is startled to uncover a Ganesh statue in the tangled

chaos of the garden and instantly recognises it as her “favourite” (93) Hindu god. He is “so familiar and old” (127) to Meena but his appearance seems incongruous with the British setting. She stumbles upon the statue at a symbolically opportune time as Ganesh connotes wisdom and the removal of obstacles. At the end of the novel, the property is where Meena asserts her identity and resists racial classification. It is an icon of the unhomely haunted-house which progressively becomes more familiar, culminating with her discovery of Harinder Singh.

Meena needs to withdraw from family life to undergo a voyage of partial decolonisation and experiences both cruelty and kindness when she tries to dissociate herself from an Indian imaginary. At this point, she complies with the dominant view of an English nation divorced from India. She is hyper-visible and invisible in Tollington due to the “something else” (105) of skin-difference which marks her out from a normalised Whiteness. Apparent friendliness in some situations is contrasted with exclusion at other times. She is accustomed to the patently apparent abuse of “name calling” and “hissed comments” (97), and does not yet have the ability to name subtle instances of marginalisation or identify “the gap between what is said and what is thought” (10). She is thus bewildered when tacitly rejected by Deirdre Rutter and wonders about “what I had done wrong” (55). Her offence, of course, is polluting the racial symbolic order by being the “wrong” colour in Tollington.

A trip to the Sikh *gurdwara* in Birmingham coincides with Meena's first major encounter with racism, just as she physically moves towards a nucleus of cultural difference. The *gurdwara* is a "converted church" (97) which alters the landscape of Britain and is altered by its location, redefining difference as an internal quality even as many Britons repudiate such difference. Meena experiences the insult of "bloody stupid wog" (97) as a physical injury that is of the same dialect as corporal hatred. In this disorientating moment, her sense of self is wounded and she loses control of her name and place. She is called into being as a racial subject, or, rather, as an inferior racialised object. The insult implements a historically forceful constitution of race through her as an individual (Brah, *Cartographies* 11). Meena begins to comprehend the miseries her parents have suffered and which have never been voiced but are written on their faces in the language of "lines" and "furrows" (98). It is essential for them to suppress any despondency or they would be overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of "million[s] of these encounters" (98). The furrows on their faces reveal a type of skin-memory in which personal histories are recorded on skin surfaces (Ahmed and Stacey 2).

In contrast to the Kumars, the Rutter family is a fragile composition which lacks connective tissue. Roberto Rutter's inability to forget the torment of war slowly poisons his household and leads to a deterioration of family ties and eruption of domestic violence. His wife is a negligent mother who engages in extra-marital affairs and treats her daughters with

casual carelessness. Meena envies Anita's independence without appreciating that it derives from a lack of parental discipline. Syal's portrayal of Deirdre disconcertingly seems to reiterate moral discourses about working-class maternal negligence and excessive sexuality. Anxieties about miscegenation often circulate around the deviant sexuality of working-class women. Deirdre is described as predatory and wolf-like, with "big teeth, far too many and far too sharp" and "an expression of dark, knowing hunger" (55). Other villagers disapprove of her sexual appetite, illustrating a polarisation between "respectable" and "rough" working-classes (Webster, *Imagining Home* 63). She is incredulous that the Kumars achieve a greater degree of village approval than herself, a native-born Englishwoman. The charming and elegant Daljit is "victorious" (216) over Deirdre and furnishes Meena with an inspiring model to later adapt in her friendship duel with Anita.

A government campaign to bisect Tollington with a motorway extension is treated as an incursion and activates "group hostility" (142) in the township. The machinery which excavates the earth for the motorway also excavates social "tensions" (143). Hostility towards strangers is heightened when the unique identity of the village threatens to dissolve into a nearby industrial estate and the city of Wolverhampton, blending into the totality of England. Even where there is nationalism, the nation-state cannot compensate for the disorienting loss of locality and stretching out of social relations (Massey 162). The White residents of Tollington

view their village as a safe asylum from the perilous city, seeking to freeze time and return to an imagined period when they controlled their living space. The “Black Country Renaissance” (143) only brings about a decline in relationships and a renaissance of racial discord.

Village turmoil reflects Meena’s personal predicament of belonging, of being “brown” (145) when her image is unrepresented in local and national life. Such absence is a form of indifference and covert silencing which maintains the pretence that British citizens are unreservedly White. The equation of Whiteness with place makes Meena experience her own body as unfamiliar and unhomely (Crane and Mohanram xi). She is injured by an invisibility-hypervisibility complex and hence associates the period as “a colour, the blue-black of a hidden bruise” (146). This internal bruise is bound up with her corporeal difference, “hidden” because of her invisibility and the psychological location of the wound. She is yet to perfect the manipulation of powerlessness into empowerment (Puar 48). The dynamics of the Kumar family are altered when Meena’s brother Sunil is born and his over-attachment to his mother emphasises her own yearning for parents in India. Meena ventures further into the physical place and national space of Tollington when she loses the guidance of her preoccupied mother. This journey of separation is an important component in her self-development or *Bildung*.

When Meena attempts to avoid her Punjabi heritage, she eschews her parents and other British-Asians as representatives of otherness. She



believes that mirrors misreflect her English identity and yearns to discard corporeality to “emerge reborn, pink and unrecognisable” (146). Her individuation from family instigates a mirror stage of personal development when she enters a harmful symbolic order and internalises a gaze of bodily norms to find herself lacking (Schoene-Harwood 162; Woodward, “Concepts” 44). During this period of confusion, Meena prioritises the approval of her peer group and misguidedly believes that belonging can be solely located “outside the home” (148). She unsuccessfully endeavours to erase an Indian heritage which inevitably surfaces in manifold apparitions.

The Tollington Spring Fete is a turning-point in Meena’s awareness of racial difference and the messiness of human relations. It is here that she realises the world cannot be divided “into strangers and friends” (173), which is also a deconstruction of the nationalist dichotomy between foreign and native. Strangeness is not a threatening substance from outside as it already inhabits human and social bodies. The other therefore confronts the authoritative self with its own repression of otherness and the impossibility of attaining absolute knowledge or self-discipline. The Fete is an institutionalised forum for performing national attachments and drawing the lines of citizenship, albeit on the level of neighbourhood nationalism. It ought to be a unifying event yet class divisions are highlighted by the venue of “the grandest house” (166). The Tory councillor who opens the Fete deflects attention from this disunity by

maintaining an illusory gulf between insiders and outsiders, urging the villagers to defend the township “against outside forces” (175).

Incidentally, the occasion marks the first public transition of Sam Lowbridge and his gang of “Tollington Rebels” into skinheads. The phenomenon of the skinhead is instantly recognisable by the donning of another skin in a common “uniform” (174) as a sign of internal beliefs and membership of a community of believers.

Sam’s vitriol against “darkies” (193) at the Fete exposes Anita’s own contradictory racism and reduces all non-White individuals to the level of body surface by eliminating their humanity. Certain words carry the threat of bodily harm and repeat historical trauma whenever they are invoked (Butler, *Excitable* 10, 36). Sam alludes to historical connotations of darkness with dirt, evil, and barbarism, and the notion that physical appearance is a manifestation of character.<sup>11</sup> The majority of the crowd denounces his outburst for offending a moral code of public propriety and tolerance. This scene of unhomeliness reveals the potential strangeness of professed friends and “how the familiar [can] turn into the unknown” (173). Meena experiences the surfacing of racism as a personal affront and loses an uncomplicated world-view of “innocence” (227). She begins to refuse the racial interpellation demanded by Anita and Sam,

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<sup>11</sup> David Sibley highlights that the positive associations of Blackness in medieval Europe, such as Black knights or Black Madonnas, were supplanted with negative imagery after the advent of colonialism (24).

demonstrating that name-calling always involves the mutinous potential of protest and counter-naming (Butler, *Excitable* 12, 29).

The collapse of homeliness is accompanied by Daljit's emotional collapse and inability to cope with diasporic loneliness, "marooned and misplaced" (9) in an unhomely environment. Meena's maternal grandmother, Nanima, is called upon at the Kumars' point of crisis. "Help from Overseas" (198) is a widespread desire for migrants and can result in additional migration from relatives. An informal practice of mutual assistance or *vartan bhanji* – give and take – is common on the subcontinent (Bhatti 43). Daljit is revived by the arrival of her mother and the support she provides such as shared caring duties for Sunil. Sunil's stifling grip on Daljit is broken when the practical and emotional needs of the family are finally fulfilled. The Kumars' *bridari* greet Nanima as an icon of a "beloved parent" and "Motherland" (201) from whom they greedily seek news. The word-choice here is quite deliberate as India is literally the land of their mothers and is often portrayed as "Mother India." Nanima is treated as a "vessel" (201) of India who carries the presence of the place within her, whereas the Kumars and their friends have lived in England for an extended period and only retain past images of the subcontinent.

There is an immediate affinity between the protagonist and her grandmother even though their prior contact was solely through the visual medium of photographs. Nanima enhances her cultural navigation of the subcontinent and is a more concrete symbol of India than her

parents. Similarly, Meena assists her grandmother to navigate the terrain of Tollington. While struggling with verbal communication, they understand each other through alternative means of conversation and a shared sense of humour. Nanima is a female role model who validates Meena's boisterous behaviour and failure to emulate her graceful mother. She enables a relaxation within the Kumars' friendship network and their Punjabi festivities spill outside the containment of four walls and into the Tollington atmosphere for the first time. Their defiant and joyful "reclaiming" (203) of outside space asserts their right to be in England, resisting definitions of national belonging which are based on blood and soil. Such an effortless blending of spheres presents a new way of living by naturalising difference and establishing a home in the public domain.

Nanima's arrival converts Punjabi from an "indoor language" (203) into a legitimate method of communication in all situations. Meena is shocked by the strangeness of hearing "Punjabi under the stars" (203), liberated from being a secretive language spoken within the confines of the house. Meena's parents usually speak Punjabi when they want to censor dialogues from their daughter and it is the language which is closest to their emotional spirits. Meena is isolated from the adults by her minimal understanding of broken sentences such as "family ... money ... death" (73). And yet, she does have a deeper union with Punjabi as it is the dialect of "the only home I had ever known" (112), a home which is both India and her domestic home within Tollington. Hearing Punjabi

triggers emotional responses which are simultaneously “unfamiliar and instinctive” (112). English has alienating effects and is the colonial language of “spiritual subjugation” (Ngũgĩ 9). Subsequently, Meena increasingly distances herself from English after learning more about British India. The historical dominance of English disguises its appropriation of words and colonisation by other languages, as with the expansion of an Anglo-Indian dialect.

In Syal’s novel, individuals cannot fully belong to a Punjabi “discourse community” (Reichl 174) without speaking the language. The ability to speak Punjabi is important cultural capital and facilitates access to other cultural conventions (Puar 40). Meena begins to make sense of her parents’ lives after rapidly absorbing Punjabi from close contact with her grandmother. She is able to form a personal relationship with broader historical events and craft a home in language, also educating the reader by translating words. Linguistic competence permits her to mobilise an ethnic identity and access the stories she has longed to hear which contest destructive images of Indians. This dissenting history obliterates her complacent ingestion of authorised facts and fuels her with the conviction to oppose national myths, if only within her mind. As a novel, though, this rebellion is conducted in dialogue with the readership.

Meena is astounded by Nanima’s confession about the colonisation of “our names, our breath” (231) as it illuminates her own unbelonging and lack of ownership in England. She is finally able to weave threads of

the past into her present social world and comprehend the continuing colonisation of this cruel history. As well as revitalising the Kumars, Nanima makes surprising connections with certain villagers and illustrates the possibilities of communicating across differences. Her interactions reveal hidden sides of previously misread people, with one character explicitly condemning the “criminal” British Raj and stating that “we should never have been there” (222). Nanima is also regarded with an Orientalist gaze as an exotic object of “fascination,” “distaste,” and “pity” (223). Nevertheless, Meena mocks the wilful ignorance of the villagers by exaggerating her grandmother’s exoticism in a spectacle of “staged marginality” (Huggan xii). Nanima’s “enigmatic smile” (221) suggests that dignified silence is a subversive exercise of agency and a learned technique for responding to colonial curiosity.

British-Asian families are often pathologised as oppressive entities which endanger the White family and prevent their own children from integrating. However, the Kumars are a source of nurturing fortification for Meena, empowering her to renounce imposed identities and a glorified view of Empire advocated by the wider English society. Their indefinite postponement of plans to visit the subcontinent is part of a recognised pattern of return myths (Bhatti 7). Meena’s developing relationship with her grandmother initiates a series of epiphanies about the ordeals and sacrifices her parents have suffered. Nanima portrays the broad-scale context of India in contrast to the isolated fragments divulged by Daljit

and Shyam. Meena suddenly realises that she has undervalued the presence of her parents and that the fragile arcs of life could easily tear them away. She observes the yearning for family, the guilt at leaving, and the inexplicable bonds of genetics when they stand together: “all of us the product of each other, linked like Russian dolls” (201-02).

The reconnection of the Kumars is juxtaposed with the breakdown of the Rutter family when the matriarch abandons it for another man. Deirdre seems resigned to a fate which fulfils all prophecies about irresponsible working-class motherhood. The collapse of the Rutter household is symbolic of the broader corrosion of an imperial ideal of the national family. Their crumbling residence exemplifies the splintered family and loss of a mother who would traditionally uphold some standard of domestic order. Meena observes “a few slivers of paint ... clinging to the exposed wood ... the back upstairs window ... cracked and held together with sellotape” (293). Her focus on the future is contrasted with the disintegration of Tollington and the desolate prospects of most inhabitants.

The seasonal rotations reflect Meena’s evolution and the “ebbing away” of her “childhood” (259). After learning about the circuits of the past underpinning her existence, the future acquires new significance and educational success is inflated to validate her parents’ decision to migrate. The heavy weight of history presses upon even the mundane facets of life and she can no longer seek solace in self-absorption. Her eventual success

at the eleven-plus examination enhances her cultural capital and social mobility. Education authorises her to question conventions and the pressure to comply with expectations, to personify a postcolonial “New Woman” who is only partially reliant on others (Hussain 54). The razing of the school is followed by Sam and Anita’s assault of a British-Indian bank manager, both events symbolising the obliteration of childhood innocence (Dunphy 638). Their “Paki bashing” derives from disempowerment and is an attempt to reclaim power, ironically, as their class abjection racialises them as subordinate Whites. In allegorical terms, the fragmentation of the village marks the expiration of an imperial nation and the bank manager is an emblem of the emergent social order.

Anita’s reference to “Paki bashing” (277) self-consciously alludes to actual hate-crimes in Britain which are now unfortunately familiar. Nationalists often justify such acts as defensive self-protection, under the subterfuge of victimhood, and differentiate them from illegitimate violence. Many Britons do oppose imperialism and racism and, even in the nineteenth century, there was sufficient support to elect two British-Asian politicians to Parliament. The youth leader of the local Methodist church, Uncle Alan, is the novelistic voice of moral integrity. He favours humanitarian compassion yet participates in colonial transactions simply from being a British citizen and a church official. His conversations with the Kumars are exaggeratedly welcoming as if presuming an entitlement



to administer national property. Such ideologies of benevolence imagine that immigrants are greeted with “WELCOME TO BRITAIN” (9) banners.

Sam distinguishes Meena and her family from the anonymous mass of racial “others” (313) as an identifiable culprit for national decline. However, the attack on an individual member of a group is metonymically an attack on an entire population (Werbner, “Essentialising” 235). Purification rituals fail to comprehend that the “metallic invasion” (269) of the motorway machinery is imminently more threatening than any perceived migrant invasion. Sam’s expulsion efforts cannot reverse colonial history or migration trends. The hazardous shades within Anita now dominate and Meena realises that she has compromised self-determination in a desperate dance to make an impression. She also starts to appreciate her commonality with Pinky and Baby, the previously rejected and betrayed British-Asian peers. Tollington is transformed into an unfamiliar place with the designation of strangers to be eliminated (Bauman 48). These strangers are the repressed objects of the English nation-home and their presence makes England unhomely for many White Britons. Sam and Anita are incapable of controlling the future and so turn to the imagined “triumphant hues” (9) of past racial purity.

Meena’s diasporic development is advanced by a horse-riding accident which forcibly isolates her in hospital. Her broken leg is an external signifier of her discovery of the mirage of home. It is later disclosed that the leg is stunted in growth and will be a permanent

reminder of this harrowing period. Her confinement in hospital delays the Kumars' trip to India and obliges Meena to accomplish healing in England (Bromley 147). Leaving would only legitimise the rhetoric of the White nation and impede her from devising new routes of habitation. Meena feels a kinship with the assaulted bank manager after being damaged by the same "boots and ... heels" (282). She is only protected from physical attack by virtue of her personal acquaintance with Anita and Sam, and is one of "the others" (313) to unknown nationalists.

In hospital, Meena mitigates the injuries of enforced unbelonging by embracing her physically dangerous difference. She incorporates stereotypes of submissive femininity in her resolutions to grow her "hair long," to "write letters to India," "to knit" and to "always always tell the truth" (284). This endorsement of a supposedly authentic self is a reaction to her prior excessive adoption of Anita's Englishness, and demonstrates how the absolutism of violent acts can lead to essentialised ethnicities (Werbner, "Essentialising" 227). Meena does display "dual discursive competence" (Baumann, *Contesting Culture* 195) by both reifying and destabilising culture and ethnicity. Anita undergoes her own transformation when she physically and ideologically unites with Sam to become "Sam-ita" (304).

The relationship between Meena and a fellow hospital patient reveals the potential for cross-cultural communication especially as they develop a secret language. Her illness also coincides with her

grandmother's yearning for a non-existent dwelling of absolute nurturance. Nanima's residence in England was always intended to be temporary and she never felt at home in Tollington. After fulfilling her educative and familial role, she is able to return to her more familiar habitat and habits which will ironically be rendered strange by her extended stay in England. Like her parents, Meena now starts to discern the consequences of her diasporic heritage and experiences the "chasm cracking open" (288) from losing a beloved relative. She consciously deviates from her prior egocentricism and chooses to suppress self-interest as an expression of "protective love" (307). Her identification as a "grown-up" (288) is a premature declaration but is indicative of an internal growth. Nevertheless, the restoration of familial ties cannot reverse her independence as a solitary being or her insertion in the social realms of gender, culture, and language.

Meena's metamorphosis into "a walking cliché of the good Indian daughter" (302) indicates a new confidence in her mixed identity and an acceptance of her status as "traveller" (304), the ultimate home of self-belonging. Her distinction "between acting and being" (289) is flawed as acting is part of being in the constant reinvention of self. Her Punjabi ethnicity is grounded in England and she adapts it according to circumstances, inferring that ethnicity is not an abstract property but a gendered process. Her ability to situate herself in a context contributes to her skills at manipulating image and subjectivity (Puar 39, 49), discovering

that she can mentally dissociate from petty insults by “floating above them all” (228). She chooses to convert her “sense of displacement” (303) into a positive outlet for disordering and renewing the meanings of places.

The township loses sovereignty as Meena salvages control of her narrative. The motorway now encroaches on the landscape and the once rural village is “indistinguishable from the suburban mass” (326). While the motorway represents a threat for Tollington communality, it offers a “new road” (174) to British citizenship and the potential presence of more Black Britons. This loss of “edges and boundaries” (326) symbolises the unions brought about by British colonialism and the beginning advances of globalisation. Inflicting brutalities on others inevitably damages the self and the internal splitting of Tollington is the penalty for colonial ventures which introduced the world into the home. Tollington is now firmly rooted in England and Britain. The Kumars have plans to leave the village and it is no longer the tranquil substitute Punjab of “fields and trees” (35) which drew them there.

The Big House is a battleground for competing nations when Meena disaffiliates from extreme Anglicisation in a “showdown” (305) with Anita and Sam. It is an opportunity to reform the racial order and assert herself as a citizen, proclaiming a sense of nation which embraces its “others” (314). She disproves assumptions that the body is a transparent sign of interior meaning or identity (Ahmed and Stacey 3-4). Her alignment with “the others” before Sam kisses her reinforces the

artificiality of his separation of desire and hatred and how Black females are “exoticised and eroticised” (Ang-Lygate 173). Meena’s explicit proclamation of otherness is a moment of self-acceptance where otherness is equated with pride. However, she is simultaneously a familiar insider and a foreign outsider. Autonomy from Sam and Anita cannot evade her immersion in England or the colonial shaping of her Punjabi identity.

Tracey Rutter’s near-death in the flooded mine-shaft represents Meena’s victory over fear and loathing after shedding Anita’s influence. In another reversal, the “witch” (317) and “bear” (206) of the Big House become saviours when Meena is forced to approach the unhomely for assistance. The revelation of Harinder Singh is a bitter pleasure of “pride and betrayal” (323) as the Kumars have endured the burden of representation alone in Tollington. Instead of actively connecting with their surroundings, “Harry” and his wife have lived vicariously through the Kumars and are able to retreat because are financially secure. At the end of the novel, Meena has a peculiar out-of-body experience which enables an omniscient view of the village and suggests that she is estranged from the place while finally growing into her body. Her return to her body is a metaphorical acceptance of corporeality and a “disalienation” from discourses that erased her from the human species (Gilroy, *After Empire* 45). At the same time, she repudiates attempts to fix her as a mere body devoid of intellect or emotion.

Syal's protagonist eventually develops a sense of belonging to multiple places with an "excess of belonging" (Ahmad, *In Theory* 130). Diasporic individuals never quite settle in any definitive home and Meena ultimately resolves that "each resting place" can be claimed as a temporary "home" (303). Her overlapping spectrum of identities and multiplicity of belonging are profoundly connected to material place. Her subjectivity is more expansive than "cultural entanglement" (Hesse 22) as she is affected by many influences in her pursuit of a meaningful existence. In addition, later life experiences will inevitably alter this array of subject positions and some existing reference-points from childhood will shift in personal importance or disappear. The Kumars' departure from Tollington signals another voyage in their "English life cycle" (327) and indicates that home is a source of belonging and a place to escape (Knowles 129). Their residence in the village also followed cycles of movement between mixed states of unhomeliness and homeliness.

The Kumars finally emulate the typical diasporic route of settling with those who are from the same ethnic group and geographical area in India. They enjoy the benefits of social mobility whereas the embattled White citizens must remain in their unhomely village. Only the wealthy Palmer family have the resources to escape and intend to move closer to a site of English identity by relocating to the Lake District. Syal's text conveys that belonging is achieved by a complex combination of internal and external factors such as relationships with others. The narrative

concludes with a pessimistic impression that, at this time, the co-existence of White and Black Britons is problematic. The gravity of colonialism is too recent and acrimonious to overcome: communication ultimately fails and there is no reconciliation between Anita and Meena. Meena's admission that "there were some things that we would never be able to share" (274) highlights the dilemma of rewriting British identity. Her retreat from Tollington is an unsustainable long-term option and she cannot repeal her partial Anglicisation. Instead, a more balanced approach to life is required to establish "*homes without walls*" (Nasta, *Home Truths* 244).

Meena identifies the ambiguous "grey area between all categories" (150) as home, a space which offers the flexibility of moving across different resting-points according to the needs of the moment. This incompleteness refuses to be subsumed in dominant national narratives and constitutes a "conditional belonging" (Song 58). Meena's "grey area," akin to Bhabha's "Third Space" (39), is an internal faculty which facilitates her physical movement in the world and involves a constant negotiation between identifications. Despite this agency, she is constrained in certain contexts by various subject positions and power configurations. When Meena seeks to locate a home, she is inevitably confronted with the shifting sites of home induced by the colonial project. Britain and India will always comprise mixtures of the homely and the unhomely for her. She decides to convert this displacement into a positive source of multiple homes and refuses to withdraw to the symbolic defeat of the Big House.

## Conclusion

### “Perplexity of the Living”<sup>12</sup> in *Anita and Me*

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Postcolonial writing can be regarded as a search for home in words to reduce feelings of homesickness. Belonging is the yearning for an unattainable status and a past that can only be re-membered and fictionalised. Susheila Nasta describes literature as a type of “cultural travelling” (Introduction 6) which crosses national and temporal borders by shifting words across different worlds. *Anita and Me* exemplifies these literary voyages and is especially influenced by the nostalgia and melancholia of the unhomely. Meera Syal’s weaving of words creates a discursive architecture which interrogates the past and imagines how the world ought to be. This social imaginary is what Homi Bhabha calls “the house of fiction” (18), a house that insists on retaining the unhomely as a necessary recognition of colonial history.

Some critics contest the transgressive potential of novels such as *Anita and Me* and the abandonment of serious hardships of poverty and disenfranchisement. One central accusation is that the concentration on diasporic space conceals the continued inequalities of neo-imperialism and casts India as a calamity to escape (Paranjape 239; Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 101). It is arguable that power structures permit circumscribed expressions of dissent which ultimately fail to alter the foundations of power. In many ways, cultural artefacts circulate in a capitalist

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<sup>12</sup> Bhabha (157).



marketplace as commodities to be consumed and are absorbed into the existing system without addressing systemic inequities. However, discursive representations contribute to the framing of material conditions and can effect incremental changes. British colonialism flourished through propagating ideologies, colonising minds, and corrupting language. Aside from self-expression, stories have a testimonial function in accounting for the multiple stories which constitute the nation. The novel is therefore a counter-discourse which assists in rewriting the nation as a space of diversity even as the performativity of the act precludes the formation of any definitive national culture (Bhabha 157).

Edward Said and Gauri Viswanathan accentuate the imperial abuse of culture in achieving domination by consent, and, similarly, cultural narratives are fundamental to the post-imperial project. Stories generate a sustaining energy for subterranean individuals and are a means of challenging hegemonic histories. This thesis disputes the argument that cultural products are commodified to the point of neutralising difference (Adorno 87; Hutnyk 106-07). It is impossible to circumvent capitalist markets and cultural commodities are not inevitably corrupted for neo-imperial agendas (Huyssen 18-19; Huggan ix). Cultural artefacts are critical to the work of building nations and can enable new subject positions and spaces to speak from, innovations which make postcolonial citizens regenerators of Britain. Nevertheless, such regeneration could be

interpreted as the continued exploitation of other lands, the reverse side of a post-imperial nostalgia that refuses the future (Baucom 186; Huggan 63).

*Anita and Me* illustrates the impediments to cross-cultural dialogue in the immediate aftermath of British colonialism in India. According to the conventional equation of Britishness with Whiteness, racialised others cover themselves in the veneer of citizenship and illegitimately appropriate material advantages. Such discourses of rights and national legitimacy reveal the intersecting dominions of class and race hierarchies. The disintegration of certainties in employment and interpersonal relations has inspired an “ambient fear” (Bauman 51) in modern Britain which is fertile ground for hostility. The very practice of creating abject others can incite aggression without any preceding adversity, although interpretations of social difference need not necessarily lead to violent hierarchies (Bochner 11; Sibley 39-40; Wray 16). The Black British *Bildungsroman* is didactic in encouraging readers to reflect and act upon their own societies (Koepke 131). Nonetheless, individual agency and the capacity for single books to elicit change should not be exaggerated. Transcendence of racial ideas is an unrealistic prospect due to their persistent potency, including the reinforcement of race as an intelligible category by anti-racist ventures.

Syal’s protagonist overtly disrupts concepts of authentic Indian and English characters. In such a work, the writer is often placed in the role of native informant or cultural translator speaking on behalf of homogenous

communities (Ranasinha 6). Literary merit can be overshadowed by a voyeuristic foraging for insider details of “real life” or “the author is paraded as part of the context of the text” (Gunew, *Haunted Nations* 77). Some authors and critics are even accused of accruing cultural capital from marketing alterity as a commodity (Huggan viii). Syal is a highly-educated, middle-class writer and is certainly not representative of migrant populations in Britain. She is clearly politicised from her involvement with organisations such as the Asian Women’s Writer’s Workshop and the Refugee Council. The novel incorporates multiple meanings and political messages are tempered by satire and humour.

*Anita and Me* is a creative reconstruction which connects memory and imagination with the past, blending the aesthetic with the historical. The novel focusses on a transitional period when the expansion of national culture to colonies shifted to a possessive mindset of restricting culture to the domestic realm and protecting it from invasion. Syal portrays a “sea of change” (299) in individual and national experiences, encouraging British identity to evolve alongside the evolution of the protagonist. The Kumars’ post-independence migration is part of a protracted pattern of settlement from colonies. The development of the heroine mirrors the rotation of her social world as she grows “in *national-historical time*” (Bakhtin 25). Her *Bildung* is incomplete and she must remain content with constant “self-fashioning” (Maxey 8). Along with other Black British *Bildungsromane*, this narrative represents the public sphere and crafts an alternative public

sphere, redefining Britishness and having material implications (Felski 134; Stein, “Black British *Bildungsroman*” 93-94). National identity is difficult to induce and Syal opposes fantasies of cohesive enclosure by including colonial heritage in her post-imperial British nation.

The socio-historical approach of this thesis elaborates the broader contextual significance of a seemingly inconsequential novel. *Anita and Me* is “a work of mourning” which links the unjust past and present with optimism for a just future (Durrant 1). The act of reading involves the reader in the narrator’s contemplation of her childhood. Testimony has private and public purposes in expanding the domain of experience, with acknowledgement presenting the prospect of justice and compelling readers to reiterate stories to others. However, there are always risks that an author’s intended meaning will be misread. The “excitement, drama and passion” (211) which Meena attributes to the subcontinent could be misinterpreted as a state of irrational chaos. It is also uncertain how far Britons have progressed in transforming “paralysing guilt into a more productive shame” (Gilroy, *After Empire* 108), a prerequisite for the advancement of new national imaginaries.

The effectiveness of any signifying strategy is regulated by the social structure in which it operates. Despite the performative role of *Anita and Me*, textual protest can coexist with racial oppression and is no replacement for engaging in action to seize political control. Neither should activism be separated into discrete domains. The dichotomy

between creativity and reality is untenable as books are both physical and imaginative objects. Representations and ideologies are evidently inflected by the material world and have material effects in determining social relations, identities, and government policies. *Anita and Me* is a type of authorial postmemory which is informed by indirect memories of historical events. In the end, its illumination of human life is more relevant than any truth claims. The fictional status of the novel implies that it features a merging of fact and fiction with half-memories. It suggests that history can only ever consist of half-memories and partial illustrations of the past. Colonial history is inerasable and the presence of postcolonial citizens and their cultural contributions elicit uncomfortable contemplations about imperial scandal.

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